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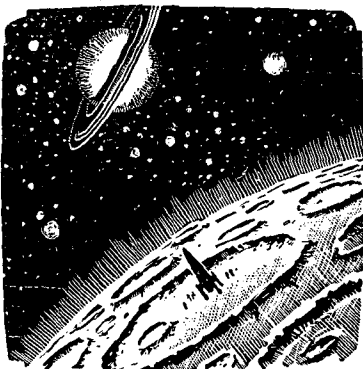
SHIELD AGAINST DEATH

A New Suspense Novel
by J. T. McINTOSH

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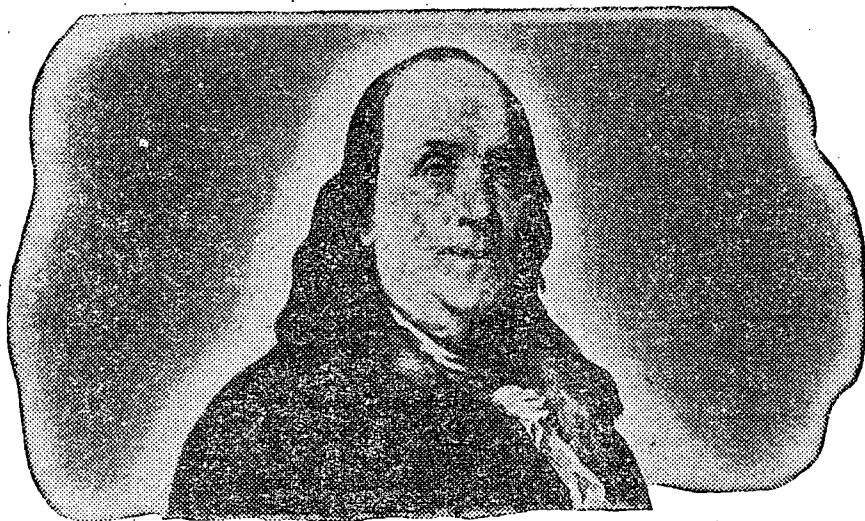
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MAY, 1957

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**shield
against
death**

by . . . J. T. McINTOSH

**Her love was the only thing
that stood between this man
and the Death that stalked
him night after night**

FROM THE top of the second highest building in the city a man fell, screaming. As he dropped he fell outwards from the slim, glittering silver-and-grey building. A few hundred feet down he struck the steel sheath over the duorail, dented it and went right on down. Surprisingly, he was still screaming.

He landed plump in the middle of a second duorail cover further down and lay still. He wasn't screaming any more. The body moved slowly, not because it was alive, but because it was very precariously balanced on smooth, curved metal. Slowly, gradually, it slipped until with a sudden rush it toppled over the edge.

It fell a mere hundred fifty feet this time.

The sidewalk, which had been by no means deserted a few seconds before, was clear for hundreds of yards around as the corpse hit the asphalt pavement.

The street was tough and stayed the same shape. The body didn't.

On the roof of the building a girl coughed and retched

Former journalist J. T. McIntosh, who lives in Aberdeen, Scotland, is the author of THE FITTEST, BORN LEADER, and WORLD OUT OF MIND, all published by Doubleday. Convinced that empathy has firmer roots in common experience than telepathy, McIntosh writes that "the more we have experienced danger the more we trust this instinct."

and held one hand across her ribs as if to hold herself together came to the parapet and stared down. A pretty girl this, tall, blonde, intelligent looking. Her eyes were quick and watchful, and even dishevelled and winded as she was she appeared very capable of looking after herself. She looked down only long enough to establish that the man who had fallen hadn't miraculously stuck on some projection only a few feet down and thus managed to be still alive. Having seen that this wasn't so, she turned and hurried to the door that led off the roof, still holding her hand against her body.

The door was locked.

For a moment she paused, suddenly desperate. Then she understood. The other door, of course, the one on the other side of the roof, would be open. She took a few steps in the direction of the other door, intent only on getting clear before the police arrived.

She stopped. Her hand went to her neck. The white beads which she had worn there lay scattered like hailstones all over the roof. She glanced down at her feet. She wore only one shoe. The other would certainly be on the roof somewhere. The skylight against which she had fallen. The wire guard had clawed half a dozen tiny strands from her dress. And

there might be other things she didn't even know about, other things to identify her.

It wasn't going to do her any good to run.

It wasn't going to do her any good, either, to deny that she'd pushed Robert Green off the roof. She knew somehow, knew with complete certainty that the other two would have covered their tracks so completely that if she even mentioned them she'd be putting herself out on a limb. The police would prove that there had never been two other men.

If she was going to be stuck with the killing of Robert Green, as she so obviously was, she had to have a self-defense plea ready. There was only one story to tell, one story that might be believed.

Her hair was dishevelled, her clothes disordered but not torn. She fixed that with two sharp tugs. The material was thin and ripped easily.

SOMEONE began to pound on the door she'd tried and found locked. She looked about her quickly, and the sharp stone edge of the parapet caught her eye. She tore her dress still more, turned and placed her bare back against the skylight housing she pressed herself back, the stone cutting into the flesh across her shoulder-blades. She twisted from side to side to make a good job of it.

Then she stood up, caught her dress about her as well as she could and went to the other door.

It gave her an unpleasant shock to find that the second door was locked on her side. She should have thought of that possibility. She twisted the key, and two policemen burst through.

The first cop cast one quick glance round the roof. "Okay, Dent, you take over here," he said. His hand clamped round the girl's arm. "Name?" he barked.

"Betty Lincoln. I was—"

Without another word he dragged her down the stairway, past the others who were trying to climb up the narrow stairs to the roof. Already, mere seconds after Green had hit the sidewalk, the place was alive with cops.

Betty started to say something. "Shut up," said the cop briefly. She learned he was Lieutenant Verne when another officer who was on his way up to the roof spoke to him. Three more cops joined Verne and Betty. Apparently it needed four husky men to handle her.

They closed in round her and hustled her to the nearest elevator.

"Lieutenant Verne!" she protested. "At least let me put something else on before you take me—"

"No," said Verne flatly.

"But my apartment is right here, and you can come in

and see I don't escape—"

"No," said Verne, and pushed her into the elevator cage.

Neither Verne nor anyone else said anything on the trip down. Betty wondered if she ought to make protests of innocence, outrage, apprehension, or just protest. Something odd about the whole affair stopped her.

Obviously there was a lot to this than she had suspected. Very much more. Already she had seen more than twenty policemen. It had been just on nine when Green fell to his death. It was hardly five after now. To be on the scene so quickly Verne and his cohorts must have *known* Green was going to be murdered. So maybe she was in the clear.

And maybe she was in deeper than she suspected.

Who rated a score of cops and maybe more coming, anyway? Why had she been arrested without a question, without being allowed to say a word? Why hadn't they let her go into her room? And wasn't it usual to get an on-the-spot statement from a suspect?

Perhaps they knew enough to believe the truth. Perhaps she should forget all about her attempted rape story and tell it the other way. Verne's way of going about things had given her time to think, time she hadn't expected to be granted.

No, it still had to be a self-defense plea. Nobody could ever prove Green hadn't assaulted her. The other way, they'd demolish her story, ridicule it, and then there would be nothing between her and the gas chamber.

Justice was suppose to be the same for everybody, but it wasn't wise for angels to count on that.

Though Justice was blind, the people administering it were not.

Hundreds of people packed the foyer, hoping to catch a glimpse of an arrest. Verne picked up a dozen more cops near the elevator, and they packed round Betty so closely that few people in the foyer could even have seen that she was a woman. They swept her outside and into a police-car waiting opposite the door.

LESS THAN ten minutes later, at police headquarters, Betty found herself in the presence of a youngish but very sharp-eyed police captain whom Verne addressed as Wayman. Three of the cops went out. Verne sat down behind her.

"Go ahead," said Wayman, "tell your story."

Something about Wayman, his manner, his choice of words told Betty that he wasn't an ordinary homicide bureau officer investigating an ordinary murder. Again she hesitated between the

two stories she might tell. Instinct told her to tell the truth. Reason insisted once again that the truth wasn't going to do her any good. She followed reason.

"I never saw the man before," she said rapidly. She didn't see a recorder, but she knew there must be one. There must be no faltering, it must all come out as if it was a vivid memory. "I met him outside my room on one five two—"

"This is Green you're talking about?"

"Yes."

"How do you know his name?"

"He told me."

"Just why would he do that?"

"I don't know. I met him on one five two anyway—"

"Top floor?"

"That's right. I was just coming out. He persuaded me to go up on the roof with him."

"Now how did he manage to do that?" asked Wayman with sceptical interest.

Betty shrugged. "Look, he's dead now, isn't he? We're not concerned with his morals or mine, are we? He was obviously a mole and didn't look in the least dangerous and whatever his proposition was, I wanted to hear it. I was pretty sure I was going to turn it down, but—"

"Yeah," said Wayman, again sceptically. "You were

pretty sure you were going to turn it down. But you went on the roof with him just the same."

Betty ignored that. Angels got used to ignoring things like that. It was easier to ignore them than fight everybody who said them.

Besides, she understood and could cope with Wayman's technique. He didn't necessarily disbelieve what she said, he was just needing her to make her speak before she thought, say things she'd meant to keep back.

"He hadn't been there before," she went on. "He didn't even know how to get on the roof. It isn't used, that roof. No gardens or anything. There's gardens on the Waterfall Building, because it's the highest, but this one is just a flat roof and the doors up to it used to be kept locked. There was a fire department inspection a while back and they made the trustees leave the doors—"

"Yes, yes," said Wayman. "Get on with it."

She told the rest of her story, careful not to draw attention to the things that corroborated it, yet explaining in passing the door locked on the outside and the one locked on the inside, the beads, the lost shoe, the strands of fabric on the skylight, and all the other things Wayman didn't even know about yet. She frankly ad-

mitted that she had put Green over the parapet but made it sixty per cent accident, forty per cent defense of her honor.

Wayman didn't say anything at this point. She was glad when a police doctor and two women officers arrived to examine her. Her bruises were evidence for her defense. She wanted to get them on the record.

They took her away. Before she was examined she was photographed from every possible angle. The photographer found the weal on her back and took two close shots of it.

LIKE VERNE, the doctor and the two policeman said nothing. It was a very thorough examination. The way everyone was working on this case Robert Green might have been the President.

Following the examination the photographer was called in again to take a picture of the other bruise. It was her solar plexus. Then the women officers produced some pins and helped Betty to effect temporary repairs.

After that, they took her back to Wayman. He looked up from what were probably the first reports from the roof. Verne was still there.

"Well?" Wayman said, looking at the doctor.

"What do you want to know?" the doctor asked. "I don't know a thing about the

case. I might tell you everything you don't want to know and miss out the important things."

"Was she in a fight?" Wayman demanded.

"Yes. Her arms were held—of course, that may have been after the arrest. She suffered a blow in the solar plexus probably severe enough to cause unconsciousness. A bruise at the back of the head and minor abrasions on the body suggest she fell back against a wire frame of some kind and lay there for some time. She was pressed back against the edge of a stone wall, apparently struggling hard at the time. She—"

"She's quite strong enough to handle a man of forty-eight, her own height, very thin, in poor health?"

"Quite. Could throw him about, I guess."

"She did," said Wayman drily.

"On the other hand," said the doctor, "she's undernourished, ten to fifteen pounds underweight, and has eaten very little today. She might feel faint after an effort, might find herself in trouble. Another thing. She's *virgo intacta*."

"Oh?" said Wayman. "All right, doctor. Write your report. We may want it soon."

The doctor went out.

"That's one for the book," Wayman murmured.

It was obvious what he meant. Betty pretended, how-

ever not to understand him.

"So you went on the roof with him. You wanted to hear his proposition," said Wayman. "Yet apparently you're not the sort of girl to—"

"I meant to turn it down," Betty retorted. "I fought him. And I'm a virgin. Doesn't that add up?"

"Yes," said Wayman. "Some people might think it made sense. But then, we know the whole thing's a lie. We don't think, we *know*."

BETTY KNEW calm certainty when she heard it. They did know it was a lie. So she'd been wrong. She should have told the story the other way. It was too late now. She had made a mistake, or there was something she didn't know, something she couldn't know.

"That's how it happened," she insisted. "I can't help it if you—"

"We know Robert Green," said Wayman. "He didn't come up to one-five-two voluntarily, he didn't proposition you, he didn't assault you, and if he had you could have tied him up with one hand."

He paused, and then gave her the first piece of information that began to explain the furore over Green's death. "Besides, he had been sending out alarm signals for six minutes before he was murdered."

"You mean—personal radio?"

Wayman shrugged. He wasn't going to answer that. "Now let's have the real story."

Betty looked at Verne, just not to look at Wayman. Verne had said nothing since they entered the building, and he seemed to have no intention of saying anything now.

"All right," she said, knowing she was beaten. She had tried something which should have worked, and it hadn't because of things she didn't know at the time. The best thing now was to save as much as possible from the wreckage.

"Can I tell this story my own way?" she asked.

Wayman nodded. "I don't know any other way you could tell it," he observed drily.

"Well, I'm an angel, you know that. I make seventeen credits a week. It costs me fourteen just to live. And I like to be independent—if you can believe that. I—"

The door opened and a man came in. Verne jumped up. Wayman didn't move, but looked respectful. This was nobody less than a commissioner.

"Tim's coming over," he said briefly.

"To see her?" Wayman asked, nodding at Betty.

The commissioner nodded. "Don't tell her anything."

"I won't," said Wayman. The commissioner disappeared as quickly as he had arrived. He hadn't looked at Betty. She hadn't seen his face either.

"You were saying you liked to be independent," said Wayman, as if there had been no interruption.

"I've been in a lot of tight spots," said Betty, "and I've got out of all—so far. Now this thing—I'll tell you the truth, but you're not going to believe it. I knew that when I found myself alone on the roof with Robert Green over the edge. So I faked this. It gave me a chance I thought. The truth didn't give me any."

"Let's have the truth," said Wayman, "and we'll see."

"I was in my room just before nine o'clock. There was a knock at the door. I wasn't dressed. I called 'Who is it?' Someone said 'Special Delivery.' That wasn't likely, I wasn't expecting anything, and I should have been more careful. I put something on and went to the door. A man came in and shut the door. As he shut it he took out a gun."

"Describe him and the gun."

"He was tall, about four inches taller than me, very pale-faced, with thin cheeks, a sort of transparent nose. You know, a big nose but thin, with the veins showing. He didn't look tough but he was.

And he hated me. I didn't know why—I never saw him before. The gun was a little silver automatic with a kind of snout. Metal curving away under the hole like a chin. I only saw it when it was pointing straight at me."

Wayman nodded noncommittally.

"He said, 'I don't care what you wear—you've ten seconds.' I didn't argue. Then he put his gun in his pocket and took me up on the roof. There was nobody about, of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

"If there had been," said Betty wearily, "I'd have been telling you this in the first place. We went up the stairway, me first. Just as I opened the door at the top, the man behind me pulled off one of my shoes. I guess you know what he did with it. I don't."

Wayman's face betrayed nothing.

"I didn't see him lock the door. There were two men already on the roof, over at the edge. One I never properly saw. The other—"

"How come you never saw this man?"

"It was like the commissioner just now," said Betty patiently. "He came in here, he spoke, he went out. I wouldn't know him if I saw him in the street."

Wayman grunted.

"Once I was on the roof, the man who had brought me

up got rough. He grabbed me by the arms and marched me across to the other two. He hurt me more than he needed to.

"That's the thing I don't understand. He hated me, and he didn't try to hide it. He loathed me. He acted as if I was something less than huma. He looked at me the way you look down at a snake when you've got your heel on it. I can't tell you how he hated me. Every time he touched me he hurt me all he could. I knew what he wanted to do was beat me to death. I thought he must have mistaken me for somebody else but—"

"Get on with it," said Wayman, obviously not interested in this.

"This man wrenched me round so I was looking at Green—"

"How did you know he was Green?" Wayman snapped.

"The man holding me told me. He said 'This is Robert Green.'"

"Why would he say that?" Wayman murmured.

"I don't know. Maybe so I couldn't pretend I didn't know who he was."

Wayman grunted again. Betty knew he was getting the impression she was a little too ready with the answers, but it might be even more dangerous to act dumb.

"Green was frightened. I didn't get a chance to look at him, though, for the man

with me tore my beads off and scattered them over the roof, mussed my hair, and hit me in the stomach. He meant me to go down and stay down, and I did. I was out for a while, and when I came to there was nobody on the roof but me."

"How did you know those two men hadn't jumped too?"

"I wasn't completely out. I had a vague memory of running steps, a door shutting."

Wayman hesitated a moment. "Why didn't you tell us this in the first place?"

"I told you. I got an idea it was the way they worked, about those two men. Partly They knew their job. They wanted Green out of the way, and they set me up for it. You won't find any trace of them. I knew you wouldn't. So I didn't think it was going to help me if I told the truth."

"Who tore your clothes and pushed you against the wall?" Wayman asked.

"I did. To make it look better."

There was a long pause. Then Wayman shook his head. "You'd have done better to stick with the first story. Someone would have believed it."

"That's what I thought," said Betty levelly.

"Now let's have the third story, what really happened this time."

"I've told you the truth."

"You were right about the second story. It stinks. Are you going back to the first one now?"

Betty said nothing.

"You might as well open up," said Wayman. "We'll find your contact, how much you were to be paid, how you got Green to go up on that roof... People think we're dumb, but we find out things like that."

"Then maybe you can find those two men," said Betty. "They got Green on the roof. Maybe someone saw them. Look, I don't know what all this is about, but obviously Green was important, obviously there are people who want him dead. You know that—what's crazy about what I told you?"

"That they should involve you," said Wayman.

"I told you, they hated me. They didn't want to get rid of Green any more than they wanted to get rid of me. I could feel it."

Wayman shook his head. "The characters who wanted Green dead wouldn't do any crazy thing like letting an innocent party have a good look at two of their agents. They..."

Suddenly he realized he was talking too much, and stopped.

"What are we waiting for now?" Betty asked.

"We're waiting," said Wayman.

Five minutes passed. Then

a man came in, a man of about thirty who didn't look like a cop. His soft felt hat wasn't like the soft felt hat of detectives. He looked more like a musician than a policeman.

"Glad to see you, Tim," said Wayman. "This is the girl."

Tim turned to look at Betty. His gaze was nothing like what she expected—nothing like anything she expected. Instead of being hard and penetrating—this was apparently a man who mattered—it was just quietly friendly. Even shyly friendly. She thought for a moment she had seen him before somewhere, then decided she hadn't. She'd have remembered him.

"Let her go," Tim said.

Wayman jumped. "Say, Tim, she lied at first and then told some fantastic story about two men holding her up and..."

"Let her go," Tim repeated.

Wayman pulled himself together. Betty could almost see his mind working. *Tim wants her to go so we can pull in her associates. He doesn't want me to tell her any more. We'll get this straightened out when she's gone.*

But Betty didn't believe that was what Tim meant. She thought that somehow this Tim knew she was telling the truth.

She got up quickly. "When someone says I can walk out of police headquarters," she said, "I don't waste any time arguing. Even if I've only got

one shoe. Thank you one and all." She made for the door.

Tim was there first, to hold it open for her. That had been done for her about three times in her life.

At the same time he was doing another, very different thing. He was holding out a folded bill to her. "Buy yourself some new clothes," he said.

For a fraction of a second she thought of refusing it. But you didn't refuse anything unless there were strings attached to it—and she could see there were no strings attached to this.

"Thank you," she said and took it.

It was twenty-three credits more than a week's wages.

"You'll get your shoe in the next room," said Wayman surprisingly. "Tell them I said you could take it."

"Thank you," said Betty again, and went.

The door closed behind her.

"Have her tailed," said Tim.

"Of course. She did it?"

"No. I don't know what her story is, but it's true."

Wayman half rose in his chair. "Then why did she—"

"I've no idea what she did, and less idea why she did it. But she's as pure as the driven snow. Purer, when you consider she's an angel. Wayman, know what this means?"

"No. Does it mean anything?"

"The Circle must have thought when they killed Bob

that he was our last empath. Otherwise they wouldn't have bothered trying to involve that girl. The fact that she's released will tell them there's another. *You'd* never have let her go. Cops never do. When a suspect's handed to them on a plate with all the evidence they need, no cop who's worth his salt ever cares whether he's really guilty or not."

Wayman moved uncomfortably. "Cut it out, Tim," he said. "Look, if what you say is true, shouldn't we hold that girl?"

"Won't do any good."

"But we can try her—and see she's freed. Juries do things like that. Then the Circle won't know there's still an empath working for us."

Tim shook his head rather wearily. "Today, tomorrow or the next day I'll do some job or other and the Circle will know there's still an empath up against them. If I'm used at all, the Circle's bound to know I exist."

He looked thoughtfully at Wayman. "You're down to your last chance," he said, "and you've got no idea what a spot you'll be in if you lose me."

"Nonsense," said Wayman. "Of course we know—"

"You know damn all," said Tim with a sudden flash of anger. "All you know, all you've ever known, is that with empaths on both sides it's stalemate. Five hundred swords plus one machine-gun

equals five hundred swords, or any other number of swords, plus one machine-gun. But suppose you were left with nothing but swords to fight machine-guns?"

"We know your importance to us, Tim," said Wayman soothingly.

"You do like hell. But I'm wasting my breath. You never *will* know it unless it happens—unless you find yourselves facing a machine-gun with nothing but swords."

He frowned. "I wonder why no others are coming through? Should be some—not many, but two or three. The Circle can't be getting them all, surely?"

He smiled a twisted, speculative smile.

"What's the laugh?" Wayman demanded.

"I wonder if Bob and I were wrong," Tim said. "Poor Bob, if he was he suffered for it. But I'm not weeping any tears over Bob until I'm sure I'm not going to follow him. I wonder if we were wrong, joining with the forces of law and order instead of doing the natural thing and joining the Circle?"

BETTY RETRIEVED her shoe and set out to walk home.

There was no traffic in the streets. There had been only one solution to the parking problem in cities, and at last the cities had found it—no cars, no parking problems. The only vehicles in cities now were police cars, ambu-

lances, cleansing department trucks and the like. Private citizens had to use the duorail or the subway, leaving their cars, if they had cars, garaged on the outskirts of the city. As a matter of fact, most of the people who owned cars lived well underground anyway, and the subway was more convenient for them.

Betty had managed to make herself look reasonably respectable, and no one gave her a second glance. It was getting dark now, and everyone else she saw was in a hurry.

Cities had stopped growing upwards for no very clear reason, started again for no very clear reason, and finally stopped for a very clear reason indeed. The reason was what had happened to Buenos Aires.

With the growth of Brazil, Buenos Aires had become a very big, very new, very tall city. It claimed the greatest skyline in the world.

After the bomb not one stump taller than a hundred feet remained. Not many people did either.

There had never been an atomic war. There had nearly been one in South America, and another in Southern Europe. Seven atom bombs were exploded. That was more than enough for everybody.

This affected the rest of the world not politically but socially. Once upon a time the elite had lived in the west end of a town, the riffraff in the

east end. Sometimes the division had been just the right or wrong side of the tracks.

After Buenos Aires the division became up and down. It wasn't that anyone expected to be atom-bombed. It was just that the people who could moved down and down, began to build their homes underground, in fact, and the people who had no choice lived in the clouds. It was a dichotomy of money rather than rank... but money was rank. The rich were the moles—the name had been applied derisively at first, but like so many names applied in that way it had stuck, it had been accepted. The poor were the angels. The people who lived in the clouds because they had no choice, because it was cheap. The first—perhaps the only—people to die if an atom bomb *should* happen to be dropped.

There were a lot of poor. Not so many decades ago, all had been well for the people of America, the people of England, the people of a few other favored countries. The world produced hardly enough to keep its human population alive.

Oranges were destroyed in California and fish in East Anglia. And in India and China and a few other places, those who didn't die of starvation suffered from malnutrition all their lives.

India and China couldn't have done much about this situation. It was the wealthy,

benevolent countries who helped them to equality...and then found that fair shares for all meant very little for anybody.

The ingenuity of men was equal to the situation, of course. The ingenuity of some men. The smart men, as usual, got what they wanted. Which meant that the standard of living went down and down and down—for those who weren't smart men. Instead of hungry millions in India and China there were hungry thousands in London, Berlin, Rome, Paris, Sydney, New York.

Of whom Betty Lincoln was one. She was pretty, intelligent, cultured, but she didn't happen to be smart. The ways which might have been open to her to better herself she didn't like.

She made seventeen credits a week and needed fourteen just for food and other essentials. She had two pairs of shoes, one coat, and nineteen credits in the bank. Being cultured, she knew that there had been a time when a girl like her, a girl in her position, her job, would have had twenty summer dresses. But being intelligent too, she knew that those days were gone and didn't let it bother her.

As she walked she thought not of the curious and dangerous events of the evening so far, but of what she would do with the twenty credits. A new dress was essential. She

could get a good enough cotton dress for a credit sixty. Prices had dropped with wages. Economically, it was the Good Old Days over again. Now it was discovered that nobody wanted them, after all. There were no more wistful stories about what a credit it used to buy. Now there were incredible tales of stenographers earning sixty a week in New York (but they must have been important executives, surely, not just ordinary stenographers).

Betty was deliberately not thinking about Robert Green or Lieutenant Verne or Wayman or Tim. There would be time for that later. She went straight up to her room. There was no sign of the police any more.

With her key in the lock she hesitated, reluctant to go in. She frowned, shrugged, and opened the door.

"Close it behind you," said a voice.

Betty's head jerked up. It was the same man as before, the tall, pale man who had come to her room and taken her up onto the roof, the man who hated her. He stood across the room watching her, and she could feel his hate beating at her in waves, like heat surging from a furnace.

The same gun was in his hand, pointing at her middle.

She closed the door. There didn't seem to be much choice. The man didn't speak

again. The gun was still pointed at her middle and she saw his hand move.

"Wait!" she said desperately. "I learned something at police headquarters. They told me...I met..."

She collapsed on the floor in a faint.

It was a desperate risk to take. The man had been on the point of shooting. He wasn't like the killers of the screen who spend half an hour explaining the whole thing to their victim and allow the rescue forces to arrive. He was there for one purpose, to kill her, and he was going to do nothing else.

But if she hadn't managed to interest him by what she'd said, there was no way out anyway. And without pretending to faint she could see no way of getting near him or getting him to come near her.

She waited, forcing herself to relax completely. Presently she felt herself being turned over, face upwards. She lay completely slack.

Then without opening her eyes she shot up with all the strength in her body. She was lucky. Her head hit him on the nose and for a second he was helpless with pain. With ferocity fanned by the knowledge that all the chances were against her being alive in twenty seconds' time, Betty threw him over and flung herself down on his ribs, turning so that the hardest part of her, the hip-bone,

made contact. That gave her time enough to smash his head against the floor. And after she had done that once, she had all the time in the world to smash it again and again until he was certainly out, possibly dead.

She rose, sore, shaken but triumphant. She picked up the gun and felt better. Even now, however, she was well aware that though she had overcome this man once she wouldn't manage to do so again, and that even the possession of the gun and the unconsciousness of the killer didn't make her safe from him. She didn't dare phone yet. She hardly dared to put the gun out of her hands, but had to. She found some string and bound his hands, over and over again. To make sure she drew a belt tightly about his feet. Then, having picked up the gun and locked the door, she felt safe.

There was probably at least one confederate of this man in the building. He would hardly batter the door down, however.

She phoned police headquarters and asked for Wayman. He wasn't available. She asked for Verne. His curt voice came on the line.

"This is Betty Lincoln," she said. "I've got one of the two men who killed Robert Green, here at my apartment."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "Got him—How?" Verne demanded.

"Unconscious or maybe dead," she said. "He was trying to kill me."

"But I've had a man tailing you. He'll be outside in the passage now."

"Lot of good he's doing there," Betty remarked.

"I'll be right over," said Verne. And he was. The assassin hadn't recovered consciousness when Verne arrived, though by this time Betty had established that he was alive and probably not too seriously hurt.

Verne stared for twenty seconds at the man on the floor. "How did you do it?" he demanded.

Betty told him.

"I guess it's possible," he admitted. He shook his head nevertheless. "Well, look, Miss Lincoln," he said, comparatively respectful now, "you'll have to come back to headquarters and make a statement. And another thing. If everything you've told us is true—and I'm making no comment about that—you're going to need protection from now on. The people who got Robert Green are out to get you too."

"But why?" Betty asked.

It didn't surprise her that she got no answer.

She asked the same question at police headquarters. Wayman was there again, only his attitude was different now. He was almost friendly. Verne was present. Tim wasn't.

"I haven't any idea why, and that's the truth," Wayman said. "I've no idea why you should be important to... these people."

"What people?" Betty demanded.

"I can't tell you that."

"If I'm in danger of my life from them," Betty said, "you might at least tell me who they are."

Wayman shook his head. He scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Protection isn't much good against these birds," he said. "There's a better way. Go and stay there tonight."

Betty took the paper. It was the address of a mole hotel, an underground hotel. "I can't afford to stay there," she said.

"You won't have to pay. You'll be there at public expense. A few days' accommodation costs less than a murder investigation."

Betty shuddered involuntarily.

"That's a hideout we use sometimes," Wayman went on. "When you leave it, forget it. If you ever tell anybody about it, we'll find out and you'll be in trouble."

They took a very full and complete statement from her, this time with the significant difference that they appeared to believe what she said. After that they were in a hurry to be rid of her and get on with their investigations.

Betty made only one pro-

test. "I need some things from my apartment."

"You can't have them," said Wayman.

"It would only take a few minutes. If I can't go myself, someone could collect them for me."

"No," said Wayman, not mincing matters. "It isn't safe. The less there is to connect your apartment with this place you're going to, the safer you'll be. Verne, take her away and make sure she's in the clear."

Verne took her away. And soon Betty saw what Wayman had meant. They didn't go out at the main door of police headquarters. They didn't go out of police headquarters at all. When they emerged into the street it was some distance away. Then, acting as if this precaution had accomplished nothing, Verne led her hither and yon until she was dizzy, and quite certain that all pursuit must have been left behind.

Verne must have been satisfied too, for he took her to the address Wayman had given her. He didn't go in with her. Presumably Wayman had phoned the hotel.

It was a small private hotel a couple of levels down. Betty went inside and looked round her with some trepidation. It wasn't easy to intimidate Betty, but she had never been in a place like this before. Everything was clean and neat and shiny.

The girl at the reception desk knew about Betty, apparently, and wasn't impressed by her. "You clean?" she asked doubtfully.

Betty thought she meant was she armed. When she realized the girl meant it literally, she reddened. "As clean as you," she retorted. "At least."

"Okay, okay," said the girl. "We get all sorts here, you know. Will you blow your top if I suggest you take a bath?"

"No," said Betty, recovering her composure. "I want a bath anyway."

The girl nodded. "Then I guess you're all right," she said. "Some of the people you-know-who sends us never use water—internally or externally."

"Oh, I drink it sometimes," said Betty, "when I can't get milk."

The girl looked at her sharply, but Betty's gaze was guileless.

Betty's room wasn't much bigger than her own tiny angel apartment, but much more luxurious. The bed was so soft she kept coming back to feel it again. The bathroom had mirrors heated to prevent condensation. The furniture was if anything too comfortable. Once seated she found it very difficult to get up.

While she was in her bath Betty had leisure for the first time since nine o'clock to think.

And she realized she was in love with Tim.

OF COURSE it was fantastic. But she wasn't fool enough to tell herself it couldn't be true. She knew it was true. She was in love with a man she'd seen for about two minutes and hadn't had time to think about since.

She had to see Tim. She understood now why she'd thought she knew him. He looked like a younger, stronger, nicer Robert Green. He must be Robert Green's brother. That didn't matter, however, except that it partly explained Tim's importance. He was important for the same reason that Robert Green had been important.

Why Betty had to see Tim Green she didn't know. It wasn't just because she was in love with him. But there was no argument about it, she had to see him, and immediately. She didn't argue. She accepted the fact, just as she'd accepted the knowledge that she loved him.

Betty stepped out of her bath and looked at herself in the mirror which formed one wall of the bathroom (you could cover it with a plastic curtain if you were too modest to watch yourself bathing). Should what she saw reassure or depress her?

She didn't take time to reach a conclusion. Towelling herself briskly, she went back to thinking about Tim. And

she didn't think of Tim as a man she'd been with for two minutes. She thought of him frankly as a man she loved. Obviously she couldn't expect him to be in love with her, not at the moment. Something would have to be done about that. She had no intention of loving from afar. All her life she had been waiting to meet Tim, waiting to fall in love with him.

The first thing was to find him. She guessed he'd be well concealed, well guarded, yet that problem didn't worry her at all. She passed to something else.

Tim had been well dressed—not only expensively but also tastefully dressed. Even to go looking for him she'd have to hire some clothes. She couldn't even walk about in this district dressed as she was without inviting comment. She looked like what she was—a pretty angel.

Mole hotels, even this one, were so discreetly run that it was a simple matter to slip out without being seen. It was easy enough to find a costumier still open, with clothes for hire. In fact, when she went in the woman there knew what she wanted.

Every evening thousands of angels, men and women, descended to the mole levels; and most of them had to hire clothes as a first step. Some of them were on frankly mercetricious missions. Some of them had girl-friends or boy-

friends of a higher social station than their own and were pretending that there was no gulf. Some of them were just angels who enjoyed pretending to be moles for a night.

BETTY EMERGED dressed like a queen in a midnight-blue gown and silver slippers. She went straight to the nearest subway depot and boarded a west-bound train. She didn't have far to go, but it was just too far to walk.

Betty had an inquiring mind. Nevertheless, just as it hadn't occurred to her to wonder about her reason for having to see Tim Green, she didn't wonder how she knew where he lived. She wasn't inquisitive. She knew quite definitely that wondering wasn't going to do her any good at all.

She reached the house and stopped, dismayed.

The mole levels were anomalous. On the other hand they were underground, basement dwellings which could never be fine, open, spacious and beautiful. On the other hand they were the houses of rich people who wanted them to look as grand and showy as possible.

The avenues—of course they were called avenues, when they weren't boulevards—were just twenty-four feet wide. The houses were exactly twenty-four feet tall, and massively faced, for their reinforced walls supported the

city above. The ceiling over the avenues, twenty-four feet across, twenty-four feet up, radiated bright but soft lights. Within these limitations the houses which enclosed the rabbit-burrow avenues were as impressive as they might be. This meant forests of marble pillars, huge stone-carved doorways, tall discreetly-curtained windows, and statues in alcoves every few yards.

Artistically the effect was execrable.

The house Betty had come to was like all the others, a twenty-four feet high frontage with a doorway which could have admitted a dragon, carved stonework, long thin windows full of purple curtains, ornamental friezes wherever they could reasonably be placed and one or two places where they couldn't.

But what was different about this house was that a dozen men were lounging about near it. Though not one of them was in uniform, even someone a lot stupider than Betty would have realized that the loungers waiting about weren't concentrated round this house for nothing.

Tim Green was well protected against the people who had snuffed out his brother's life.

It was clear that Betty wasn't going to get to him unless she confided in his guard.

She was just about to walk

up to the house, anyway, and see what happened, when she became aware of something important. Tim Green was no longer in the house. She was almost certain he'd been there a few minutes before, and now she was almost certain that he wasn't. The question was, where was he?

There were limits to what Betty knew. It was wonderful, true, that she had known where Tim lived and had been able to go right there though no one had told her and though she had never been in the district before. Now, however, she was at a dead end. She knew Tim Green was still somewhere around, but not where.

BETTY WALKED slowly back the way she had come. She was forced now to examine her awareness, to try to think things out instead of just accepting them.

Tim Green, and almost certainly Robert Green too, before he died, had some strange gift. Betty thought at once of telepathy, but that wasn't quite right. The word would do, however, until she knew better.

Tim had looked at her and known she hadn't murdered Robert Green. He hadn't had to ask questions, hadn't needed to touch her. If he hadn't looked into her mind he had done something very like it.

Now, did Tim know she'd come looking for him? Had

he in some way told her to seek him out? Had he told her then or later where he lived, how to get there, and made sure she came?

Had he told her to be in love with him?

Betty didn't know, and she could sense that whenever she tried to analyze, the thing she was trying to analyze squirmed from under the glare of mental light she turned on it.

The more she tried to pinpoint Tim's present position, the less she knew about it.

Perhaps distances played a part. She turned back, walked a little way and stopped, trying to work the thing out in her mind *without* analyzing.

Almost at once she knew again that Tim Green was very near. She still didn't know exactly where.

Well, if mental analysis destroyed this strange knowledge, perhaps mental relaxation would help it. Walking along slowly, keeping well clear of the men surrounding the house where Tim had been, she tried to let herself *feel* without analyzing or criticizing what she felt.

Gradually she became aware that Tim was below the avenue. As soon as this ludicrous conclusion formed she disbelieved it and it dissolved.

Analyze, criticize, or disbelieve, she told herself, and this sense, whatever it is, can't work. You have to... just let yourself know.

She still found it hard to believe that Tim could be below the avenue. There was another level below this one. There were no stairways connecting the various levels, only elevators running in vacuum shafts. Air pressure was kept separate on all levels.

She managed, however, to still her critical faculty. When she succeeded she became aware that Tim was moving at right angles to the avenue, away from the house which was being so carefully guarded.

"What do you want?" a voice asked behind her. It was sharp but polite, intended to frighten if she was guilty, but not offend if she was innocent.

Betty turned. One of the guards was looking her up and down suspiciously. He must be wearing rubbers.

"I don't want you," she retorted.

"If you're just walking," he said, "just walk somewhere else."

"Some other time I'd argue," she told him. "But as it happens I'm going anyway."

"Keep going," he advised.

Betty walked slowly away from Tim Green's house.

Tim himself was by this time in the next avenue. Still walking slowly away, still conscious of the eyes of the plain-clothes man on her back, Betty became aware that he had turned at right angles. She ducked through

the first archway into the next avenue.

Half a minute later she was outside a house, a much smaller house, and knew Tim Green was inside it. Inside it, not below it. This time there was no guard outside. She walked straight up to the front door and rang the bell.

TIM GREEN opened the door. He stared at her for several seconds, unable to place her. When he didn't seem particularly pleased. He didn't speak. He simply took her arm and pulled her inside.

"Were you followed here?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"Can you be quite sure?"

She thought back. "Someone may have picked me up around your house," she said. "The other house."

"How much do you know?" he demanded.

"Not very much. Just that you're a... a telepath or something. You touched my mind tonight, and maybe you left behind more than you meant to. Anyway. I had to come and see you."

She had considered telling him bluntly that she was in love with him, to see what he did about it. Now in his presence she found it was impossible. That sort of thing was all very well in theory, but not very adult when you considered putting it into practice.

It was still true, more than ever true. He was less friendly than he had been in Wayman's office, more excited, more jumpy. It didn't matter. She hadn't fallen in love with the Tim of one moment, a still photograph.

"We've got to get out of here," he said jerkily.

"But you just came here."

"So did you. And that altered the situation. I'm just trying to make up my mind whether I'm glad you came or sorry. Come on, let's get back to the other house."

Once more Betty sensed that there was something going on which she didn't understand. She hesitated, reluctant to move until she had some idea what she was letting herself in for this time.

"You know you're an empath?" Tim asked.

"A what?"

"Then you don't. But it's obvious. You've just proved it. Nobody but another empath could possibly have found me here. I didn't think even an empath could do it. And the more I think about it, the more I wish you hadn't."

"Why?" Betty asked.

"Let's get out of here first," Tim said. He paused as if listening.

"This ability of yours isn't clairvoyance, I suppose?"

"No. And it's not just mine. You've got it too."

"Have I? I thought—"

"Don't argue." He led her

into the kitchen. He did something, she didn't see what, and the refrigerator swung aside. There was a hole behind it.

Tim was on his knees, about to crawl into the hole.

"Must we go that way?"

"It's the only way."

Betty shrugged, hitched her long skirt up about her hips and took off her stockings. She was piqued when Tim showed not the slightest interest in these proceedings.

They crawled into the hole. Within a yard or two they reached a shaft leading downwards. Tim touched something, and simultaneously the tunnel closed behind them. Betty found it quite as fantastic as any of the other events of the day. A private underground tunnel between two houses savored more of the Middle Ages than the world she knew.

TIM RELAXED slightly when they were in the other house, the guarded house. He even showed some interest now in Betty's legs, which was something. Perversely, she wasted no time in putting on her stockings and pulling down her dress.

"Now tell me all about it," she said.

He led the way from the kitchen in which they had emerged to a warm, comfortable lounge. "Drink?" he asked.

"I don't use it."

"I do." He poured himself a stiff one. "There's something I have to do first." He paused for a moment as it making up his mind. Then he picked up the phone.

"Get me Wayman," he said. "I know he's at home. I wouldn't call him if it wasn't important. Get Wayman."

During the pause that followed he killed his drink. "Wayman? Come right over, will you? I've found another empath—that girl, Betty Lincoln. Of course she's all right. Thing is, I guess this means we have to go ahead with that plan...now, before the Circle is ready for us. Hell, you don't think I'm bursting with enthusiasm, do you? But I guess it's got to be done...Okay, we'll be waiting for you."

He put down the phone, poured himself another drink, and turned to Betty.

"All right," he said. "This thing you and I have—"

"How do you know I have it?" Betty asked.

"How did you find me?" he countered. "Listen. It isn't telepathy. No one can pick words or ideas out of another person's brain—yet. It's a sensitivity to atmosphere. To aura. To feelings. Mostly, the atmosphere created by a lot of people, close to you. Sometimes just the attitude of one person. Look, there were about a hundred reasons why I shouldn't have

opened the door to you a few minutes ago. Yet I did. Why?"

Betty didn't know why.

"Because I knew you weren't dangerous. I didn't know who was outside the door, but I knew it was safe to open it."

"Yes, but you've been jumpy ever since."

"That's something else. You'll hear about that when Wayman gets here. Forget that just now. I tell you, you can't pick information out of the air. You can't tell what's going to happen, or what people are thinking. You can only feel things—and guess."

"About one person in half a million has this gift. Seems a lot, doesn't it. Only most of us go psychotic early. Generally paranoid, sometimes schizophrenic. We sense we're different, we can't take what goes on round us, what we know but nobody believes but ourselves. Never mind that now. What you can do is this. You meet someone, and you know whether he's for you or against you or just doesn't care. You know when there's going to be trouble. You know when you're safe. You know when you're among people who think quite differently from you."

He filled his glass again. Betty didn't speak, concentrating on the effort to make sense of his quick, jerky, disjointed sentences.

"You personally," he said, "have taken half of this for granted and disbelieved the other half. Otherwise you'd know all about this, you'd be crazy, or you'd have lost the gift. You'll find you don't have to learn anything except how to sit back and receive, and after you've got it sort everything out."

"Why didn't I use this until I met you?" Betty asked. "Did you activate it somehow?"

Tim nodded. "Could be. That happens sometimes. You sense a touch...no, not that. There isn't really a touch at all. You sense empathy itself, try to use it yourself and find you can. It's instantaneous."

"But what's the good of it anyway?" Betty said. "Why are you so important? Why was your brother killed? Why did those men who tried to frame me hate me so much?"

"So they hated you?" said Tim with sudden interest. "How did you know?"

"They didn't try to hide it. I felt it, I..." She stopped abruptly.

Tim nodded. "You felt it. They were members of the Circle, of course."

"What's the Circle?"

"In a moment. You asked why empaths are so important... In the country of the blind the one-eyed man may or may not be king, but he's certainly a very important

character. When you can do something that nobody else can do, even if you can only do it inefficiently, even if you can hardly do it at all, you're still way ahead of everybody else. Suppose you could guess right not fifty times out of a hundred on an even chance, but fifty-two. You'd make your fortune in a week."

He filled his glass again. "Well, this isn't anything like that. You can't guess better than anyone else, except about people. Look, you haven't been very successful in life but surely you've very seldom been wrong about people?"

Betty nodded.

"Well, that's why," said Tim. "What it amounts to is that we empaths are a different kind of people, even if we don't learn this until comparatively late in life. What do people do when they discover they're different, in some way superior to ordinary people? They try to take over the ordinary people. That's what the Circle tried to do."

"What's the Circle?" Betty asked for the second time.

"Empaths like us. International, like us. Only we're working with the ordinary people who aren't empaths and the Circle are working for themselves. I don't know who's right. Maybe the Circle is. Maybe I'm being a traitor to my own race, siding

myself with the last one—like some Cromagnon making a pact with Neanderthal man against his own clan and people."

"They killed your brother."

"That's right. But I've been responsible for killing some of them, too... Anyway, you've got no choice, Betty. The Circle declared war on you. They must have found out you had empath tendencies, how I don't know. They must have been sure, too that you wouldn't join them—that you'd be on the side of law and order, against them. A traitor, as far as they were concerned. A traitor like me. And they're right. You'll be drafted, partly to keep you out of mischief, partly so that you can be studied, partly so that you can be used."

"I'm beginning to understand," said Betty. "Empaths developed...how long ago?"

"About five years."

"And some of them became the Circle—the new rulers of Earth. The others, like you and Bob, backed the old order. So it became a battle between empaths, with new ones like me in the middle."

Tim nodded. "That's it in a nutshell."

"How exactly does the government use empaths?"

Tim shrugged. "We can tell the level of a man's loyalty just by meeting him. We can walk around a factory and sense that there's going to be a strike. If there's a

leak anywhere we can feel the leak, simply because a leak means disloyalty somewhere and we can feel disloyalty. We know whether a man's got a weak spot. It shows up when we meet him, for at some level he knows about it and it throbs with his efforts to hide it. We know when a man's lying—we even know when he's going to lie, before he speaks. We know—"

"How do we know?" Betty demanded.

Tim shrugged his shoulders. "That's the gift. You know now, for example, that you can trust me, and that all this is true."

Betty nodded slowly.

"You'll have to learn some things," Tim said. "But the only important thing is this—to learn what you can do, and *believe* you can do it. You don't have to learn it from me. Wayman could tell you what to do, though he doesn't have to. Oh—speak of the devil."

Wayman came in.

"Hello, Wayman," said Tim. The bourbon he'd been drinking was beginning to have its effect. He was flushed and artificially cheerful. "Meet Betty Lincoln, empath. Be properly respectful."

"You're quite sure?" Wayman asked.

Tim turned to Betty. "See what I mean about the blind?" he said. "They never believe anyone can see. Prove

it time and again, they're never satisfied."

Wayman flushed. Betty got a hint of the friction there must always be between people who could do a thing and people who couldn't. Wayman was evidently detailed to protect and work with empaths, but there was friction even with him. Tim's manner didn't help.

Tim turned back to Wayman more soberly. "We've got to go ahead with that plan," he said.

"What plan?"

"What Bob and I were going to do. Only I'll have to take Bob's place, and Betty will take mine."

Wayman looked startled. "Can she do it?"

"She found me," said Tim simply.

Wayman hesitated. "I don't know that I've got the authority to let you go ahead with this, Tim," he said. "Bluntly, it's more than an even chance that we'll lose you."

"But you'll have Betty," Tim pointed out.

"We've only got your word for it that she's—"

Tim threw up his hands in frustration and turned again to Betty. "See what it's like?" he demanded. "Even when they know you're an empath, they won't believe a word you say."

"All right," said Wayman. "I'll believe you. But all the same—"

"You say you don't know that you've got the authority to let me go ahead with this," he said. "I'm damn sure you haven't got the authority to stop me."

He got up. "You'll be able to do everything from here," he said. "Au revoir—I hope."

"Aren't you going to explain to the girl?" Wayman asked.

"You can do that. I want to get started before I let myself be convinced I shouldn't do this."

He turned to Betty and to her amazement caught her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. "I know you love me," he said. "You must. We'll see about that when I come back... if I come back."

And with that he was gone.

WAYMAN spent twenty minutes on the phone. The fact one of his brief calls was to the President would have convinced Betty, if she'd still be in any doubt, of the importance of the empaths.

She was grateful for the opportunity to get her thoughts in order, to integrate what Tim had told her and what she could now guess.

People with the abilities Tim had mentioned could be a mighty force for good or evil, at least. It was understandable that many of the first empaths who had dis-

covered their own powers had allied themselves against ordinary non-empaths—secretly. They could do that, finding each other as she had found Tim.

It was also understandable that the more responsible men and women who found themselves empaths had allied themselves with the accredited government of the world, realizing that this new talent would have to be integrated with all the other talents of humanity.

And the Circle had been right around her.

The world hadn't been kind to Betty Lincoln, angel. But that didn't mean she felt justified in using her new power to get her back on a society which had done little or nothing for her.

It wasn't sane to declare war on the society you'd been brought up in. To try to change it, yes—that made sense. However, Betty found herself, without argument, on Tim's side, on society's side, on the side of the multitude who weren't empaths.

Perhaps the Circle—after all, they were empaths too—had been able to sense that. That was why they'd hated her. She was the traitor, not they. She was the empath who would betray empaths if she got the chance. So they'd tried to fix things so that she didn't get the chance.

Wayman was through at

last. He turned to Betty, frowned at her, visibly wondered what to say to her.

"Tim's crazy," he said at last.

Betty shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't know what he's doing, but he isn't crazy."

"What was that about you being in love with him?"

"None of your business," said Betty. "What's going on?"

Wayman collected his thoughts. "The Circle have about three empaths," he said. "There are others with them—hired men, malcontents, spies maybe...we don't know. What matters is the three empaths."

"Two," said Betty. "I handed one over tonight."

"Three," said Wayman. "I'm not counting him. Before Bob Green died, Tim and Bob had worked out a plan. A very simple but very dangerous plan—dangerous for Bob."

He stopped again, trying to work out what to say. Betty could understand his difficulty. He was a non-empath, explaining empathy to an empath.

"Empaths can sense one another," Wayman said, "but only if...some emotion is involved. We could take Tim all round the city in an armoured car and he couldn't detect the Circle empaths any more than he could de-

tect gold. Not unless they were careless. Understand?"

Betty understood. That was why Tim had said *I know you love me—you must*. Because unless she loved him she couldn't have found him. Even with all the empathy in the world.

"The only way Tim can find the Circle," Wayman went on, "is to place himself alone, in the open, in actual danger: Then let the Circle know he's alone, in the open, in actual danger. Then let the Circle know he's alone, in the unguarded. Then let them hunt him."

Betty stared at him, the color draining from her face. So that was what Tim was doing.

"It was supposed to be Bob," said Wayman. "But he's dead. It's desperate anyway. It's got to be real danger, of course, or nothing happens. If we had Tim tailed, the tension wouldn't build up. He wouldn't know why, but he wouldn't get anything. The situation wouldn't jell. If Tim was guarded in any way, same thing."

He went on talking, but Betty, though she tried to force herself to listen couldn't take in what he was saying. She was aware only of Tim, walking alone to give the Circle a chance to kill him, as they'd killed his brother.

She knew now why he'd shown no concern over Bob.

As soon as he met her he'd known what he had to do. That was why he'd said he didn't know if he was glad or sorry she'd come. He hadn't felt Bob's death much because you don't grieve over someone else if you're not sure you're going to last the day out yourself.

"What do I have to do?" she asked abruptly.

Wayman jerked in his chair. "I've just been telling you," he said.

"Tell me again."

"Open yourself up to Tim. If you do love him it's easier. Think about him. Don't let yourself imagine what *may* be happening to him, that'll lead you off on the wrong track. Just think about Tim. You'll know where he is and how he's feeling. I'll get a map..."

He got up and went out quickly. Betty was interested to see that he was prepared to leave her alone. Was it possible he really trusted her? No...she barely asked herself the question when two cops came in and stood quietly by the door.

"Make yourselves at home," she said.

They paid no attention to whatever.

The place must be alive with guards, apart from those in the street.

WAYMAN was back. He spread out a map of the city, with insets of the various

mole levels. "Look at that," he said. "Get familiar with it, so that when you think of a place you'll be able to put your finger at the right spot on the map straight away."

"I don't know much about the mole levels," said Betty.

Wayman looked worried. "Did Tim know that?"

"I guess not."

"Well, look at the map anyway."

Betty looked at it. Unused to her newly-awakened gift, it didn't even occur to her to try to place Tim on the map. That made it easy. "He's there," she said, pointing excitedly, before she'd even realized what she was doing.

Wayman nodded.

"Aren't you going to alert the police bureau in that section?" Betty asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I told you, he's got to be in danger. Real danger. Look, Miss Lincoln—Betty—now this is started, we've got to play it Tim's way. He must be in some danger already or you wouldn't be able to pick him up—"

"Either that," Betty murmured, "or else I love him very much."

Wayman was taken aback. "Oh...that. Yes." He looked at Betty speculatively, trying to read her. But Wayman was no empath. Betty knew enough already to be quite sure of that.

"Anyway," Wayman went

on, "the danger's got to get worse. If I alert the police in that section, Tim will be that much safer and he'll feel it and get nothing. In fact, you'd better give me back that map. You're Tim's safety-line, but we don't want you to be too good. If you know where he is all the time, that might be enough to stop him getting a thing."

Betty tried to relax. At this moment, of all moments; she became aware that one of the cops at the door was finding it hard not to look at her and harder still when he did. She was making a big hit with that cop. It was only then that she remembered how provocatively she was dressed.

That was a pleasant, relaxing thought. Presumably now she'd be well looked after by a society which needed empaths. Money, clothes, jewels, all the food she could eat...

SUDDENLY she was in a street. It was night. She was with Tim, in a city street, but she might have been in a dark forest hunted by wolves. It was the same feeling. Oppressive, terrifying, silent. The sort of silence which is more than a mere absence of noise—the sort of silence which has plenty of sound but not the sounds one wants to hear, the sounds one is listening for, desperately...

It wasn't a picture, really. She imagined the city street just as she imagined the forest and the wolves. Both were equally real, or equally false.

The feeling was utterly real.

Death was stalking her—or Tim, it didn't matter. Not closely enough for the source of the danger to be identified, just closely enough to be sensed. Death had an appointment with her. Death would keep it. Would she?

She tried to think of Tim as the victim, not herself, but it didn't work that way. Empathy... *a deep, sympathetic understanding.*

The most shocking thing about it was that this was only the beginning. The wolves were in the forest, but not near. Not close enough.

Betty realized now why Tim had been so jumpy. It took courage enough to walk unarmed through a dark forest haunted by wolf-packs. How much courage did it take to decide the wolves were too far away, and go and look for them?

"Snap out of it," said Wayman abruptly, and Betty was back in a warm, comfortable, safe room, with a six feet two cop staring down at her and shifting his large feet uncomfortably.

"Don't do that," said Betty sharply. "I may be new at this, but I've got to do it my way. You don't know any other way I can do it—remem-

ber? Stay out of this. When I want you I'll let you know."

She thought with passing amusement as she relaxed again that it was no wonder the Circle considered themselves something special. She'd seen Tim treat Wayman as a sort of office-boy. Already she'd started to do it herself. They'd have to watch that, or they'd be qualifying for Circle membership.

It took a while before she could make contact again. Effort made it impossible. You had to wait patiently and let it happen. It was like going to sleep when you were too excited to sleep. The more you tried, the further sleep receded.

Prompting the feeling by imagining what it would be like was bad too. Betty thought of the dark forest, and nothing at all happened.

When at last she did manage to relax and get something, it was brief, hazy and patchy, but it did explain why contact had become so difficult.

Tim wasn't in danger any more. Something had cut the tension. For some reason he was safe for the moment—so there was nothing for Betty to sense.

"No danger," she said. "He must have wandered out of a trouble spot. Or the Circle aren't interested in him just now. I don't know."

"But he was in danger?" Wayman asked.

"Yes, just a moment ago. I wonder—"

Suddenly she was in a jungle—a hot, steaming plague spot. She knew that the pictures her mind supplied were allegories, if anything. Her mind supplied images, examples simply because it worked that way.

But this jungle was a pest spot, and that at least was real. Tim was in real trouble.

Betty guessed the jungle image had come because here the threat could come from many things and very quickly... a snake underfoot, a tiger in the thicket, a panther slinking silently through the long grasses. She tried to brush away the imagery and get at the truth, but all that happened was that she lost everything for a moment, and when it came back the imagery was different.

NOW IT was an open, empty plain. She was the only thing on it, erect, unguarded, naked in a vast emptiness. The essence of the image was a sense of being exposed, visible for miles, quite unable to hide.

Behind her something moved. She turned. Nothing. She saw something out of the corner of her eye, and spun round. Again nothing.

And then something began to move toward her, something plainly visible, something that didn't hide itself but hid its shape.

Betty panicked. Not because she feared the thing that was advancing, but because she didn't know what to do about it. She didn't know where Tim was. She didn't know what the menace was, or where it was, or what to do about it.

She snapped back to the warm, safe room in Tim's house.

"That map, quick!" she exclaimed. Wayman thrust it at her.

She tried to relax again, tried to make contact with Tim. She couldn't do it. Was he dead? Was there nothing to make contact with?

Gradually she forced herself to be patient, to be calm. She settled back in her chair, deliberately relaxing all her muscles.

Without any conscious effort on her part the muscles she was trying to relax tightened and she was tense in every nerve.

The thing approaching Tim was very close. And he was terrified. Betty realized that why every muscle in her body was taut almost to agony wasn't because she was afraid for Tim, or afraid for herself. Tim's fear was part of her, so much a part of her that her own body expressed it.

Desperately she thought once again *What can I do?* They hadn't told her about this. When she talked to Wayman, when she withdrew herself from Tim, she knew

no more than Wayman did. When she tried to locate Tim she lost contact. How could she help when she could stay in contact with Tim only while she did nothing?

Abruptly she found part of the answer.

It wasn't up to her to do everything. She couldn't see through Tim's eyes, know exactly where he was, assess and identify the danger. She had to leave all that to Tim. Her job was to preserve a certain balance.

Out in the city somewhere a man was being hunted. The situation was as old as life itself, and perhaps the sense Tim and Betty were using, supposed to be new, was actually as old as life too.

The new thing was that Betty and Tim were using it consciously, deliberately, to find a known enemy.

It wasn't a battle of minds. Humanity hadn't got that far yet. It was a conflict of emotions, almost tangible emotions, feelings which could be passed from one mind to another.

Betty snapped back once again.

"He's near, but not near enough," she said quickly. "Yet already he's in terrible danger. We've got to lessen it—leave him in danger, but not such a spot as he's in now."

She stabbed at the map. She hardly looked at it. "Send men there," she said. "I've got to get back..."

THE EASE with which she resumed contact this time was a grim indication of Tim's peril.

A pattern was beginning to emerge. The situation was so clear, in fact, that Betty no longer got hazy images of forests, jungles or barren plains—she got something more like a diagram on a sheet of plain paper.

There were three Circle men—no, four. Three points, but one was a double force. Two men there. No, a man and a woman. Betty could even tell that.

And there was hate. She could feel the hate, the way she'd felt it from the man who had forced her to go up on the roof. She knew now that she'd been using empathy even then, before she'd met Tim.

They hated Tim because he was working for the little people, the unimportant people who weren't empaths. They hated him because he stood in their way, the only important obstacle in their path. They couldn't do anything until they got rid of Tim.

Which they now meant to do, at any cost.

Slowly Betty felt the tension lessen a little and knew that her order to Wayman had done that. Tim would feel it too. Would the Circle? Very likely. And they might guess, if they hadn't guessed already, that though Tim was

dangling temptingly in front of them, there was a hook in his mouth.

Betty fought the impulse to direct Wayman's men further, to make Tim so safe that the Circle would withdraw their interest and the whole operation would have to be cancelled.

If she did that, Tim would have to go through all this again. It was kinder to Tim to let him go on with it now—even if all her impulses were to save Tim, and leave the Circle alone.

The three points which represented the Circle empath's were moving about, going round Tim. They were jockeying for position...

And they achieved what they wanted. Though they were no nearer Tim, though there was no sign that anything significant had happened, suddenly their hate and Tim's danger were so strong that Betty almost cried out.

She wasn't on the battlefield. She didn't know what maneuver had just been made, what advantage had been gained. She knew only that Tim was down for a count of eight and it might be ten.

And there was nothing she could do! She grabbed blindly for the map, knowing as she did so that anything she might suggest would be too late. She even had a flash of what was actually happening.

Tim was on the first mole

level, just below the surface. A drunken party were marching raggedly home, talking and singing. It was a friendly, happy, harmless group and had nothing directly to do with the Circle or Tim or the battle which was going on.

But one of the Circle empath's had managed to tip off one of his men...

The roisterers were jostling Tim in a good-humored, playful way, mussing his hair, pushing him, offering him a drink but not letting him escape.

They didn't know, though Tim, Betty and the Circle did, that among the group was a man who wasn't drunk, a man who had a knife, a gun and a silk scarf, and was on the point of using whichever was most convenient as soon as the opportunity occurred, knowing his companions were all too befuddled to retain any clear idea of what had happened.

Betty was pointing at a spot on the map, knowing that it could only be a matter of seconds before the assassin got his chance. And as she did so, though she wasn't in direct contact with Tim, she felt the bubble burst.

The danger was over. It had been a count of eight. Tim was up and fighting back.

In the urgency of the situation a few seconds before, rapport with Tim had been so close that she knew exactly what was happening. But

safety was less dynamic than danger. She had no idea what Tim had done. Probably he had identified the would-be assassin in time. But how had he dealt with him, unarmed?

It didn't matter. Betty went back to Wayman.

"You know where he is now," she said. "Look, things happen too fast for me to be able to tell you what to do. Besides, you know what can be done and I don't. Next time, if I just tell you it's time, will you take just what action you can?"

Wayman nodded. Betty noticed he now had a small police radio in front of him, the telephone being too slow. She hadn't seen anyone come in, she had been too occupied at Tim's end.

It was very difficult to make contact again, which meant that Tim was in little or no danger. She cast around for so long that she began to be afraid the Circle had withdrawn completely.

She came back to Wayman. "Your men are too close," she said. "Pull them back."

A few minutes later there was a flaming instant of tension, gone almost as soon as it came. Whatever that was, Tim had dealt with it. Shortly afterwards another period of stress lasted longer, but wasn't as dangerous.

It looked as if the Circle were throwing in their ordinary non-empath agents and Tim was having very little

trouble in dealing with them.

For a moment Betty knew exactly where one of the Circle members was. She told Wayman. The question was, how did you capture an empath? She didn't wait to see. She was back with Tim at once.

TIM WAS running, apparently. Yet there was no serious danger. Betty couldn't understand. She understood a few moments later when there was a sudden sharp wrench, rather like an electric shock, and she was flung back to her own environment. She blinked at Wayman uncomprehendingly.

"Got one," said Wayman with satisfaction. "You're doing all right, Betty."

"You mean—you killed him?" Betty asked.

"What did you think we were going to do—ask him to join the police force?"

"What happened?"

"Tim's been trying to split one of them off, I guess. He drew off three of them and left the other so far behind he gave up. Then Tim went under cover—took a trip by subway, I guess, where he was quite safe and the Circle lost him. He managed to spot number one for you, you told us, and we got him."

"Shoot first and ask questions afterwards?" asked Betty.

"With the Circle," said Wayman grimly, "we shoot

first and don't ask any questions at all. Now I wonder if the others will give up?"

Betty couldn't make contact for quite a while. When she did, Tim and the three remaining Circle empathths were so close that she almost stopped breathing.

Yet the tension was dying down. She could feel it dropping, dropping. Tim had been in real trouble, but whatever it was, he'd dealt with it. Everything was going blank, as if the volume control on a radio were being gradually turned down.

She reported to Wayman.

He got up. "We've got to go there," he said. "The Circle's trying to get Tim without using empathy. They're all blanking out. Tim has to, too. They know about you by this time, of course. Let's go."

Betty stood up. "But where?" she asked.

"You tell us," said Wayman.

She shook her head. "I can't. They've all blanked out, just as you said."

"Mean you can't find four empathths, all within a square mile?"

Betty tried again, shook her head.

Wayman was looking desperate. This was exactly what he wanted, all the Circle empathths in such a small space that he could throw a cordon round it and arrest every human being inside it. But he didn't know where. Tim and

the Circle had been moving around so much the previous fix was no use.

"Wait," said Betty. "Maybe I can find Tim again, the way I found him tonight."

"Last night," said Wayman, glancing at his watch.

Betty was amazed to find it was seven a.m. She realized she was desperately tired.

The cop who had been impressed by her was putting a man's coat round her shoulders—one of Tim's no doubt.

"Thank you," Betty said, with a smile. The cop red-dened. She saw she had found another friend. Tim and the susceptible cop. Not Wayman. He would never be anyone's friend. He was a policeman.

THEY WENT out into the avenue. "Not down here," said Betty suddenly. "Up in the open."

"Where?" one of the cops asked. Wayman waved him silent. Wayman knew how empathths worked. Betty couldn't get anything direct. To find Tim, she would have to clear her mind of questions and let it work in a vacuum.

They went up to ground level and ten policemen and Betty piled into two cars. It was already light, the pale cold light of early morning.

"I don't know," said Betty uncertainly. "You see, there's absolutely nothing going on..."

"With Tim and three Circle empathths almost touching each

other, there must be something going on," said Wayman. "They're not holding hands."

"Holding hands," Betty repeated thoughtfully. "I got something when you said that. Holding hands in a park... what's the nearest park?"

"City Bounds."

Betty shook her head. "No. What other parks are there?"

"Green Park?"

"Try that." She frowned as the cars started off. "I wish I knew more about empathy."

To her surprise Wayman laughed. "You know more than Tim," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"There's degrees in empathy, like everything else. Tim's better than any of the Circle's empaths, otherwise they'd have got him long ago. You're better than Tim. You get things quicker and you get more. This, now. Nobody else but you could find an empath who didn't want to be found."

"I don't know that I can either," said Betty. "Anyway, this is wrong. Try Herbison Gardens."

The cars changed direction.

"That's where he is," said Betty excitedly. "Somewhere in the park. Hidden, I guess. I don't know about the others, though. They may have gone."

As they reached the park it was becoming quite clear to her how important the battle she and Tim were fighting was.

Without empaths hemming

them in, blocking their path, there was no limit to what the Circle might do. This struggle showed that. It was like a fight between two men over an anthill. To ordinary people, any empath was practically invulnerable. He could sense trouble before it became trouble.

She hadn't had time to work out what empaths could do. But Tim had, and he was risking his life to destroy the Circle...

"They're here," she said. "All of them. In the park."

That was all Wayman wanted to know. He gave crisp orders. Within a few minutes the park was surrounded. "Still here?" he asked Betty. "They haven't got away?"

She nodded. "I can be quite sure now. The three of them are radiating now, of course. Tim isn't—he isn't in any danger."

Wayman turned to two of his men, including the susceptible cop. "Take Miss Lincoln outside and wait," he said.

Betty started to protest, but saw it wasn't going to do any good. She went with the two policemen back to the cars.

She was just about to step inside when the electric shock came again—much worse this time. She went rigid and fell beside the car, half under it.

Another empath had died.

The two cops lifted her into the car, watching over her anxiously.

"I'm all right," she said, lay

back and closed her eyes.

That shock was going to come twice more...perhaps three times. Tim was still there.

SHE COULD guess what was happening in the park. The two remaining Circle members—they were the man and woman who had been together all along, perhaps brother and sister, or husband and wife—were the hunted now, not Tim. She felt their danger as earlier she had felt Tim's. And even now, with a police cordon round the park, with Wayman and his men looking for them with orders to shoot to kill, their danger was less than Tim's had been a few hours earlier.

They were moving about, trying to lessen their danger. Empaths merely had to turn round to know that this way was safer than that, that walking was safer than running, that hiding was a good chance. If there was the ghost of a chance of escape, the two Circle empaths would escape...

Betty sat up sharply, grabbed the handle of the door. The two cops, startled, pushed her back gently but firmly.

"You don't understand," Betty said breathlessly. "I should have known...Tim was being chased when he came in here. He found the only safe place. Now the other two are being chased.

They've found it too—the only safe place. And Tim's still there?"

She struggled with them. Unsure whether to keep her where she was or take her to Wayman, and reluctant to handle her roughly, they let her get out of the car. Immediately she dashed into the park, with the two cops close behind her.

Betty knew exactly where to go.

The keen identification that came with real danger had brought her a flash of the true situation, like the one she'd had when Tim had been surrounded by revellers with a cold, sober assassin among them.

Tim had had his back to the wall when he came into the park. He couldn't go any further. He'd had to hide. He'd been hiding ever since, and the Circle had known it, which was why they'd been so determined to stay in the park they'd allowed themselves to be trapped there.

Now, trapped, they were in much the same position as Tim had been. And like him, they found the same answer.

Betty flew across the park, under trees, across a stream, her dress trailing behind her. Far off Wayman saw her and hurried toward her with a dozen men. The two cops with her could have stopped her, but kept just behind her.

She reached the pool. None of the cops had been there.

None would have been there, but for Betty, until it was too late.

There were two small lakes separated by a sort of dam with a promenade along the top. In the middle of the nearer lake, making for the promenade, were two swimmers.

"Shoot them!" Betty exclaimed. "Or they'll get Tim. They're armed, he's not."

"But there's no sign—" one of the cops said blankly.

Betty tried to seize his gun. He held her off, looking at his colleague, wondering what to do.

Betty looked round desperately. It would be a couple of minutes before Wayman arrived. The two cops with her were reluctant to do anything in the absence of orders. And the heads of the two swimmers, one dark and short-haired, one blonde and flowing, were very close to the dam.

Betty turned, dropped off her heavy coat, and dived into the pool.

It was futile, but it was the only thing she could do. The two swimmers heard the splash and turned their heads. But they must have known before that that pursuit was close. All they could hope to do now was get Tim before Wayman got them.

The woman half turned as if to swim toward Betty.

His mind made up for him, the susceptible cop fired. He may have meant to fire a

warning shot. If so, his aim was out. The woman reared clear to the waist out of the water and slid back. When she came to the surface again she floated head down.

Meantime the man had dived and disappeared. Betty wasn't halfway to the dam. She carried on doggedly.

Suddenly a movement made her look up. Tim was on the promenade waving her back. She stopped and trod water, startled.

The last remaining Circle member, frustrated in his attempt to get Tim, was coming back. He was obviously a strong swimmer. Betty turned in sudden panic.

For the first time she felt danger which was real, which was immediate, which was danger to herself. It wasn't second-hand fear she experienced this time. She thrashed wildly back the way she had come. The empath's gun would probably be useless in the water, but he would have a knife too, and only one thought—to kill before he was killed.

He nearly made it. The susceptible cop, his susceptibility a handicap this time, missed twice and the Circle agent caught Betty by the arm. The cop was then scared to shoot in case he hit Betty.

Fortunately Wayman wasn't. He arrived just then and fired one shot. The grip on Betty's arm tightened, then relaxed. The man beside

her slipped below the surface.

Tim and Betty were rushed back to the cars. Though Betty was shivering under three borrowed police coats, she was in far better case than Tim, who had been in the water for a long time.

"I found that place because I had to," he told Wayman, his teeth chattering, "and stayed there because I had to. Beneath the promenade there's a place where water can flow between the two lakes. There's two feet of air above the water level. It's a perfect hiding-place because hardly anyone knows it exists, nothing's visible and there's no sign from the promenade of any movement of water between the lakes."

"Then how did you find it?" Wayman asked.

Tim shrugged, trying to grin. "Because I had to, I told you. Of course the Circle threesome couldn't find it. Not until they were in as tough a spot as I'd been. Then they knew, just as I'd done, that they had to swim and dive and stay where they found themselves... But Betty, you needn't have worried so much. Naturally when they were coming, I knew."

Betty grasped his hand and pressed it.

"And that's really the end of the Circle?" Wayman said.

"Here, anyway. I think we'll be able to handle anything else that comes along—empaths plus authority ought to be able to beat empaths alone."

He sneezed.

Betty pushed him into one of the cars and followed him in.

"I love you," she said, ignoring Wayman and the other cops.

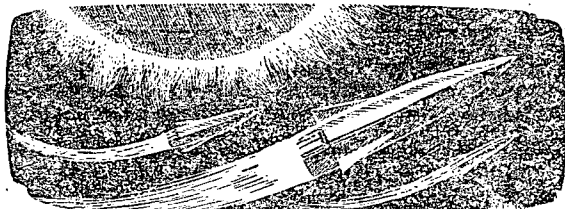
"I know," Tim said, and sneezed again. "We can hardly help it. If we've got any feeling for each other it bounces back and forth between us and keeps getting bigger. Give me about two weeks and I'll love you too."

Still ignoring Wayman, Betty kissed him again. Tim sneezed.

"A week," he said. "Three days."

Betty put her arms round him and kissed him properly. Tim started to sneeze, realized he didn't need to.

"I love you too," he said. And for a change, he kissed Betty.



the muted horn

by . . . DOROTHY
SALISBURY DAVIS

She didn't believe in superstitions, but she thought it wiser they put it away where no one would find it....

THESE were the moments when it felt good to be a farmer, Jeb thought. From where he stood at the pump he could see the clean straight rows of young corn, unbroken in any direction he looked. A day's work.

He had cleared the field of thistle and he felt as though he had driven out a thousand devils.

The cat was watching him from the back porch while he filled the tub and lathered himself with soap. She smoothed the fur on her breast. "Stepping out tonight, Cindy?" Jeb said. His own mind was filled with thoughts of Ellen and the music shop, and their evening together after the shop was closed. He whipped a handful of suds to the ground and the cat leaped into it. She bristled with disappointment and stifflegged it back to the porch.

"That was a dirty trick, Cindy. I'll give you the real stuff in a minute."

"She's had her milk," his father said from the doorway. "Supper's on the table

Last Month, in John Brunner's haunting When Gabriel..., a young musician came into possession—for a brief while—of a horn that he ought not to have heard as yet. Now, Dorothy Salisbury Davis, President of the Mystery Writers of America and distinguished novelist, comes still closer to that borderline on the other side of which ages-old forces hover.

and there's company waiting."

"I'll be right in. How does the corn look, Dad?"

The old man looked down at the field. "It'll be choked again in a week," he said, turning back into the house.

Jeb emptied the tub and hung it up. He wondered if, twenty years from then, he would be like his father. He was the sixth generation of Sayers farming this stubborn New England soil, and he was still washing at an outdoor pump. No, he decided, he would not be like his father. The old man fought every improvement he tried to put into the place. He still distrusted electricity. Every time there was a thunder storm, the switch had to be thrown off before he would stay indoors. And he was not much worse than the majority of people in Tinton. Jeb tickled the cat's ear as he went up the steps. "It's a hell of a life, Cinderella. But we'll bring them round yet."

The company was Nathan Wilkinson, town moderator, deacon of the church, and publisher of the oldest weekly in the state. "I won't keep you from your supper," he said, shaking hands. "I've come to tell you I'm putting you up for elder in Tinton Church, Jeb."

"Oh," said Jeb, looking from Mr. Wilkinson who was examining the backs of his hands.

"It's a great honor, my boy," the deacon continued. "There's no more than half a dozen men received it at your age in the whole history of Tinton. Your father should be mightily pleased."

"Oh, aye," his father said without looking up.

Jeb moistened his lips before speaking. "I feel I must decline the honor, Mr. Wilkinson... Will you have a bite with us?"

"I will not, thank you. May I ask your reason for declining? If you're afraid the board won't confirm it, in all humility, I can say my word is..."

Before he had selected the delicate word to complete his thought, Jeb said: "If it's not impertinent, sir, I'd rather know your reason for nominating me."

"It is impertinent, Jeb. Most impertinent."

"There's always been a Sayers on the church board, Jeb," his father murmured uneasily.

"Nominated for good and true service," Jeb said, "and upright citizenry. Would you credit me with those virtues, Mr. Wilkinson?"

"I think you're capable of them, Jeb—when you're through sowing your wild oats."

"I think I was done with them when I draped the parish chains across the vicars' tombstone. That's a long time ago, sir."

"But you're still proud of it, aren't you, Jeb?"

"Not exactly. It was a stupid thing to do. But I'm not ashamed of the reason I did it. It's a long past time that Tinton outgrew its chains."

"The chains are nothing but a symbol, Jeb," Wilkinson said with paternal patience. "They're a symbol of sin and the bondage into which it sells a man. But I did not come to discuss either with you. Think over the honor I'm offering you. Give me your answer at services tomorrow. Good night, Martin." He nodded to Jeb's father and went out the back door.

"The meat's as hard as leather," the old man said, putting a portion on each of their plates.

"No harder than Wilkinson," said Jeb.

His father had nothing to say during the meal, but his face was tightened with pain. Finally Jeb could stand it no longer.

"Don't you see what he's trying to do, Dad? He wants me to get into line, into his line, and he figures if I'm an elder, I'll have to do it. I'm working for what I think is right for Tinton. There's nothing wrong in that. It used to be wrong to dance. Now there's even church dances. I want a town where people speak through their board members, instead of being spoken to or for."

His father shook his head. "I know nothing of politics, Jeb, and I want to know less."

"Damn it, Dad, you need to know more. We all do."

"You'll not swear in this house, boy."

Jeb got up from the table. "Then I'll swear out of it," he said, "if that's swearing."

He went to his room and changed his clothes. It was the only place in the house where he felt at home, there and in the fields and woods. At times he thought that it would be better for him to leave Tinton. For five years he had put every spare moment into the town and the church. He had organized study groups and bought the books with his own money, money he should have laid away for the time Ellen would marry him. Despairing of bringing Tinton into the world, he tried to bring the world into Tinton. There was not even a highschool in the town. Those who wanted it enough traveled eighteen miles morning and night.

"It's the chains," he said aloud, "the damned blasted chains."

There was a legend about the town that in the early days it had been a wicked place, so wicked that once the church elders had gone among the citizens in chains lest one of them fall into temptation. Thus bound together they had surrounded

the maker of evil and captured him. Jeb could almost see them, so obsessed had he become with the story. He wondered what the poor devil had done. The chroniclers had left that out. Conveniently, he thought. But the chains still lay in the church belfry, and whenever a preacher was hard put for a subject, he was likely to stumble over the chains that day. It was after one such sermon, that Jeb, at eighteen, had hauled the chains to the cemetery and strung them over the tombstones of the vicars buried there in the seventeenth century.

Downstairs, he stopped at the kitchen door. He father was still sitting there, in the semi-darkness now. "I'll be home late," he said gently. "I'm sorry if I disappoint you, Dad. But I'm trying to do what I think right."

The old man looked up at him. For all his stubborn blindness, he knew how hard it was for Jeb to stay sometimes. His gratitude was in his eyes. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Jeb. Whenever you want to reform something, you do it from the inside if you're honest. It isn't the easiest way, ever. The easiest way is starting something new. But first you've got to try and fix up what you've got. If you're honest, that is. And I don't know a more honest person than you, Jeb."

"Thanks, Dad. I'll try."

He decided to walk the two miles to Tinton. When he reached the main road the sun had already set and a heavy blue mist hung close to the ground, reminding him of the thistle he had hoed that day. In a way, it was the same with all his work. Thistle was quicker than corn. But he could not abandon it any more than he could abandon Tinton itself. He tried to buoy his spirits with the thought of Ellen. But she, too, was part of Tinton. For all that she admitted her love of him, she had not consented to marriage. It was as though she were in some sort of bondage.

The full moon was rising. It would be overhead by his return. Far below him he could see the lights going on in the town, and he could see the smoke of the seven-fifty train. The mist lay like a long sheet over a hollow that ended at Hank's woods. He could hear a car grinding to a start somewhere, and the long whistle of the train. He watched it come into view between the hills and then vanish again. When it's sound was gone, there was only the burble of frogs.

The usual Saturday night crowd had congregated along the main street, the men half-sitting on car fenders, waiting for their wives to finish shopping or the kids to get out of an early show.

Jeb knew them all. He waved and said a word here and there. Outside Robbins' music store he stopped at the window. He had not seen Ellen for a week. She was showing a man and his two sons all the harmonicas in the place. As he watched her, Jeb's quarrel with Tinton fell away. There seemed to be an aura of goodness and happiness about her. A wisp of hair had strayed out of her braid. She kept brushing it away as she might a fly while she talked. By the time she noticed him, Jeb was pantomining a hot harmonica player. Her eyes laughed at him. He went in, but Ellen did not leave her customers, not even for a moment to say a word to him. He was being over-sensitive; he told himself—hot and cold, like a kid with puppy love. He forced himself to watch her until she looked at him again. He winked. She came to him then.

"Silly Jeb. Where were you all evening?"

"Examining my conscience. Thinking of you."

"In that order?"

He nodded. "I still don't understand why you won't marry me."

"Sometimes I don't either," she said. There was a blast of sound from the counter. "Please boys, not unless you want to buy that one..." She turned back to him. "Jeb, will you do me a favor? Mrs. Rob-

bins bought some more relics. They're in back. Would you dust them and put them in the case for me?"

As he walked to the rear of the store, he noticed other customers in the record booths. Ballet music and blues blended into each other as he passed. He was proud of the store. It was largely his idea. For years, Mrs. Robbins kept it as a curiosity shop to attract the tourists who came to Tinton because it was so "quaint." The relics, he found, were a mandolin without strings, a fife, and an ancient horn. All of them were clogged with dust, and the horn was tarnished black. He rummaged through a cupboard and found rags and silver polish. He was depressed again. Ellen was casual, and he had needed something strong, something warm. She came to the back room a few minutes later.

"I'll close up soon. How are you coming, Jeb?"

"Almost done. Where'd she get these things?" he asked, but not really caring.

"The Rutherford place. I'm afraid Miss Hannah is hard up. That fife's supposed to have been used in the Revolution."

"It looks it," he said.

"You're an angel, Jeb." She brushed his cheek with her lips as she left him to return to her customers. And for some reason that hurt him even more than her indiffer-

ence. "Be a good boy," everyone seemed to say. He had to shake off this pettiness. He returned to work and tried to distract himself by thinking of the Rutherford place. It was the oldest house in Tinton. In fact, it had all but survived the family, for in his time there was only Hannah left. She was older than his father and unmarried. Perhaps when all the old families died out Tinton would change. He, himself, was the last of six generations in the town, and still not married at twenty-seven. There might be a reason beyond random for that. Surely something more than fancy held him waiting for Ellen all these years, and her from marrying him. He felt now that they would never marry.

The blackened horn was taking color in his hands, a deep gold that glowed like a core of fire. Indeed, it seemed very warm to his touch as though it were a thing he was temporizing instead of cleaning. It was a simple instrument, not quite as long as his arm, and wonderfully fragile-looking. He pushed the rag gently through the bell end, and taking a coat-hanger and bending it, he worked the cloth up to the mouth, cleaning away, perhaps, the dust of centuries. When he had finished he spread a cloth on the table and laid the horn on it. Its

simple beauty enchanted him. He was impelled to touch it, to run his fingers over its warm smoothness, around the notches which must have guided its tonal range. While he carried the fife and mandolin to the front of the store and made room in the case for them he felt an urgency to return to the horn.

"I'll be a few minutes more, Jeb," Ellen said.

He scarcely heard her. As he leaned down to lift the backboard of the case, he imagined he saw the horn glowing in the semi-darkness. He could close his eyes and see it, as one sees the sun long after having looked at it. Beside it again, he lost all sense of time and place, even of Ellen. He picked it up tenderly, with the feeling coming over him that he could take from it the music of heaven and earth, the stars, the sea, the grass, the birds, yesterday, tomorrow.

He moistened his lips and put them to the mouth of the horn. Against his lips the pressure was sweet and natural, as a kiss might be, and all the while the golden beauty of it enthralled him. He held it loosely for fear of injuring it, and then finally, like an impatient lover, he breathed into it his wish to give it life. The sound was no more than a whispered moan, the wind perhaps on a hushed night. But he could hear it still when he took the horn

from his lips. Time being nothing to him, Ellen was beside him instantly.

"What are you doing, Jeb? That sound would raise the dead."

He showed her the horn but she saw nothing wondrous about it.

"You look flushed, Jeb. Do you feel well?"

"I'm all right," he said, running his fingers protectively over the horn. He was glad she had not commented on it, even on its beauty.

"If you must play that thing, please take it outside. I should be through soon. I think it's very inconsiderate of Mrs. Wells to buy records at this hour. She has all week ... Really, Jeb. You don't look well."

He turned from her, the color driven higher in his face with anger at her words, "that thing". "I'm all right, I tell you."

"All right, Jeb. I must go back," she said quietly. "I'm near the end of my patience too."

He waited until he was sure that she had left the room before he moved. Then he unbolted the back door and went out, carrying the horn beneath his coat.

The closing of the door behind him released Jeb from every tie that had ever held him. In the moment or two that he stood in the shadows of the building, he seemed to see the climaxes of his life

turning like reflections in the facets of a diamond, and then the reflections were gone, and only the crystal deepness of the unmarked facets passed before him, filling him with the urge to touch each one with his personality, his power. The sweet, buoyant air seemed part of him. He felt that he could bring a blessed warmth to wastelands, a coolness to the desert... this by nothing more than impulse. And all the while, the horn was warm next to his breast and becoming more and more a part of him.

He drew it out and looked at it, a thin line of fire in the darkness. He lifted it to his lips and once more breathed into it. The sound now was like a lonesome bird call. He paused and heard a rustle, as of animals stirring in the night. Again he touched the horn to his lips, this time covering a notch with his finger, changing the pitch. Presently he alternated the two notes. When he stopped to listen, the sound of rustling heightened. For a moment he thought the sea had climbed beyond its walls and driven in upon the town. He moved away from the building and the rustling followed him. As he went he heard his name called out into the night at first behind him, and then to the left of him, and then to the right, starting as a familiar voice, and growing

with each repetition more strange, more distant. He walked through the side streets stealthily, with cat-like swiftness, and the rustling followed him, heightening all the while, and seeming at times to sweep above and past him. He could even feel it wafting about him the way the wind might, although not as leaf was stirring among the trees he passed.

At the edge of town he paused and sounded the golden horn more boldly, swelling the tones until they were true and strong. He played his fingers down the tonal openings, exciting a soft, rich trill of music. The rustling intensified. He was in the center of a whirlwind. He pushed through it, fashioning the rhythm of the music to the step he took along the road. Presently he was half-stepping, half-skipping, and the rustling took on his rhythm. Somewhere ahead of him two round lights came out of the darkness like two strange moons traveling side by side. Almost upon him, they turned with fierce abruptness and were gone. He took the horn from his lips. The light of the true moon was everywhere, and among the rustling sounds came the burble of the frogs, the frenzied scolding of birds disturbed in their nests, and the chatter of scurrying animals. Jeb laughed aloud, and the hills picked up his laughter, and

swung it back into the fury of sounds about him. Again he played. He did not pause until he came to the edge of Hank's woods. There the fog still lay like spun linen and he felt that he might bounce upon it as a child bounces on a bed. It was a passing fancy, but it drew him from the road along the edge of the woods, where, as he went the birds awakened and followed him, joining their song with his. He sat down on a stump and rested. The birds carried along the melody, a translucent sort of music: little bells, reeds, the long thin tremelo of hair-like strings. In his hand the horn was vivid gold, giving a light that was reflected in the eyes of the little forest animals watching him. He realized the rustling sound was gone. He laid the horn across his lap and put his hand upon it, its velvety warmth answering his tenderness. His breathing quickened and the smell of earth came to him and a mustiness that was almost sweat-like. The rustling sounds were returning, at first quietly on one side of him, and then surrounding him. He stood up and climbed onto the stump to breathe above the stifling air near the ground. The rustling swept away in front of him toward the meadow. The horn in his hand seemed to quicken to the movement of his fingers on it, and he drew his other

hand affectionately about it as though he were alone for a moment with his beloved, suffering an exquisite anticipation.

The music when he once more tilted the horn into the night had a quiet sadness that soon grew into melancholy. It was a lament that might have been winded over the last fires of a dead hero's camp. The birds grew still. In the meadow the fog seemed to break, wisping upward in a hundred little pyramids, the slow movement of them suggesting prayer or mourning, and in the midst of them a larger core of whiteness writhed and vibrated. The shadows deepened as the moon passed further over the forest. Jeb played on, the melancholy in him growing deeper. Then the first fears of parting with the horn came to him when he saw a searchlight sweep the sky and was reminded of the dawn. His heart cried out against it, and his whole body shivered with the motion of the core of whiteness in the field. But, as becomes a lover who is still with his beloved, however immanent departure, he was moved to gayety.

The music changed, his fingers flying over the pitch-keys, provoking laughter in the throat of the horn. To this the birds responded, and soon the whole forest was merry. Even the frogs quickened their tympany. In the

field the pyramids of mist were dissolving and gradually shaping into white swirls, churning, as if whirled about by many dancers. Inside himself, Jeb felt the growing of some struggle. It was his adolescence again, or more than that, it was a lifetime of adolescence, urging a definition or a freedom—a merging with the music. The field was vibrant. His mouth was burning with the heat of the horn against it, his whole body on fire with the wild white heat.

A sudden stillness came upon the creatures of the forest. Jeb was aware of it although he played on, feeling the climax of his music almost upon him, and feeling as he played that he must be stronger than some force that would try to stop him. Whatever was happening in the field was happening to him, and there was a logic to it, in the ways of his logic that night. There was a presence there, and it was a part of him and his beloved horn. The birds flew out of the trees and about him, almost touching him with their wings, and still he played. There was a stirring somewhere behind him, as of the wind starting up suddenly among the leaves, and then came a rattle. It grew louder until he recognized it. The sound was the clanging of chains.

For a moment he stopped,

but the horn clung to his lips, and while he listened to the clanging, almost upon him now, the horn grew cold to his touch, but clung still to his lips now like frosty metal in the winter. A terrible fear came on him. The birds were gone, and no small curious eyes stared up at him. In the field, the mist had taken the shapes of a hundred sheep tumbling out of the meadow, moving away from him faster and faster. Watching them go, he felt a great surge of anger that drove the clanging noise from his ears. He stiffened every muscle in his body and forced himself to the greatest height he could reach. He strained his head upward and tightened his grip on the horn until it was cutting into his flesh. Then, poising the dying instrument high above him, he poured the full breath of his lungs into it, and through it—a great long cry that tore through the night like the anguish of the betrayed.

As he sounded the horn a second time he turned and emptied its last fierce tones into the woods, into the face of whatever evil crept upon him there. The chains were silent. His arms fell to his sides, and he heard a tinkling sound as the horn fell from his hand upon the stump. The swishing noise came upon him again, and he thought, somehow of taffeta and buckskin trousers. With

it came the musty smell of sweat and earth again. Something brushed him to the ground. His legs were too weak to hold him. He fell forward on his face, the ground sweet and steady beneath him. He rolled over, and for a moment saw the mists sweep into the woods above him. Then he slept.

When Jeb awoke the glisten of dawn was all about him. He knew where he was presently, but it seemed that he had come there a long time before. There was a lightness in his head as though he were coming out of ether. From somewhere near him he heard the plaintive lowing of a cow. He stood up and listened for the lowing again, and then followed it through the long, wet grass. "C'boss, c'boss," he called softly. The forlorn answer came to him, and after it, the weak bleating of a newborn calf. He found them in the shelter of a grove of trees that separated his land from Hank Trillings, the cow licking her baby and trying to nudge it closer to the warmth of her body. Jeb took off his coat and wrapped it around the calf. He picked it up and carried it home, its weary mother following after them.

In the barn he scattered fresh straw and threw a blanket over the cow. He prepared a hot mash which he was feeding her when his father

came in. The old man watched a few moments without speaking. The calf had found its mother's milk.

"Came early, didn't she?" the old man said.

"Some."

"Where'd you find her?"

"Near Hank's woods," Jeb said.

His father was thoughtful for a moment. "I wonder if something could have frightened her?"

"Maybe," Jeb said.

"You ought to have changed your clothes before you went out to look for her, Jeb." He said no more and was gone about his chores when Jeb looked up.

The two men arrived early for church services that morning as was their custom. Jeb was weary, but he felt a contentment that he had not known before. The night was no more than a dream to him, and Ellen was waiting at the church gate, as lovely as the spring itself. He got out of the truck and let his father park it.

"Are you all right, Jeb?" she asked, reaching out her hand to him.

"Yes."

She clung to his hand a moment. "Will you ask me again now to marry you?"

"I will, and I do ask you, Ellen. Will you marry me?"

"Yes, Jeb. Last night when you left me, and when I called and you didn't answer, I thought that I had lost you,

and I knew then that if I had, I had lost my life."

He smiled at her and tightened her hand between his arm and his side, but he didn't speak. Near them a group of townsmen were talking.

"...I tell you as sure as I'm standing here," one of them said, "there was a tornado last night. I saw the spiral on the road when I was going in town. I pulled off the road just ahead of it and the motor died. I jumped out of the car and lay in the ditch, and I heard the wind in it screeching and howling."

"You dreamt it," somebody said. "You didn't hear of any damage this morning, did you?"

Ellen's hand was pressing into Jeb's arm as they listened.

Hank Trilling took off his hat and scratched his head. "Well, there was something queer going on last night. The dog kept barking, and I'd go to the door and listen. The birds were singing all night long."

Nathan Wilkinson was standing among them. He noticed Jeb and excused himself. "Jeb," he started, having tipped his hat to Ellen, "I'm afraid I was premature in my proposition to you last night. There's a peculiar revolt in the Board of Elders. I'd find it a bit awkward if they refused to confirm... Well, you see my position?"

"Yes, sir," Jeb said. "I appreciate your confidence in me anyway." Then he haddled with the same blandness: "Perhaps when I've proven myself worthy of the honor, you will propose me?"

"Of course, my boy. Of course I shall." He swept his hat off to Ellen.

Jeb and Ellen walked on toward the church. Among the women on the steps was old Hannah Rutherford. She caught Ellen by the arm and led her and Jeb apart. "Those things I gave Mrs. Robbins, Ellen, was there a horn among them?"

"Yes," Ellen said, the word scarcely getting out of her throat.

"I don't believe in superstitions, Ellen, but I think she ought to put that away where no one could try to play it."

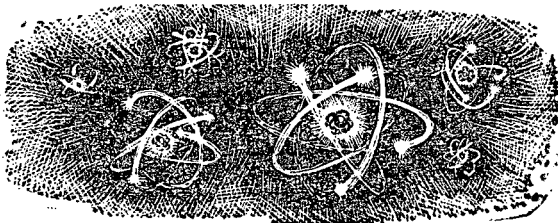
"Why?" Jeb asked. "Why should no one play it, Miss Hannah?"

The old woman looked up at him. "Particularly you, young man. I remember your escapade with the chains. As

I say, I put no store by it, but my grandfather found me with it in my hands once and he told me that a young man had brought it to the village in his grandfather's time when music wasn't allowed. They caught him playing the devil's tune on it, with the whole of Tinton dancing like the damned. He was executed as a witch, and he cursed them horribly. He wished them no rest until the chains were gone from Tinton. It's an old wives' tale, but I'd put the horn away just the same."

"Ellen, wait here for me," Jeb whispered.

He went into the church and up through the choir loft. He pulled the ladder from under the dusty pews stored there and tilted it to the trap door of the belfry. There was nothing but the church bell, which began to toll the service then. The floor was thick with dust except where lately something had been moved from it. But there were no footprints, and the chains were gone.



the nut

by...TED LEVINE

Even in Fantasy there had to be a beginning premise which would be at least partially based on a definite fact.

"ANYHOW, here's the idea," said the Writer.

"Uh huh." The Editor popped two unsalted peanuts into his fat little mouth and perched his round bottom on the corner of the desk.

"It starts right here in New York City, back in the Spring of 1957. The place is Central Park at 79th Street, by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. You know?"

"I live at 84th and Madison," said the Editor. He closed his eyes. Listening was the only thing that came easy all day.

"At that time," the Writer continued, "there were only a few thousand squirrels in the park, maybe 30,000. People fed them nuts and pieces of bread."

The Editor opened his eyes and looked stunned. The Writer went on.

"Anyhow one of the people who fed the squirrels over on 79th Street was an old man named Henry. He was retired on a good-sized pension and he didn't have a family any more. So most of the time he stayed in the park and watched the squirrels and fed them bread crumbs.

Ted Levine has taken time from considerably different labors to consider the interesting question of why people — and others — behave as they do. This all happens in a not too distant future, in a New York different from the city you perhaps know or have certainly read about.

"There was only one question that began to bother Henry:

"Why didn't the squirrels ever leave the park?"

"He thought about it a long time. After all, there wasn't any wall or fence at 82nd Street. The green of the park just ended, and the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue began. The squirrels could have walked right out, but they didn't.

"At first he thought it was the traffic. Maybe the people and the cars on Fifth Avenue frightened the squirrels. So one night he came into the park at around 3:00 in the morning. It was quiet. The cars had stopped moving, and there weren't any people in sight. But the squirrels still stayed in the park. He could hear them climbing the trees right on the edge of the park, but not one of them climbed the trees on Fifth Avenue. Why? It bothered Henry."

Without looking down, the Editor scratched something on the back of an envelope.

"Well, the next day Henry tried an experiment. In the afternoon he bought himself a loaf of bread, cut it up and put the pieces in a paper bag. Then in the very early morning he was back in the park. It was the middle of May, and there was almost a full moon. He sat down on a bench and threw a couple of

handfuls of bread crumbs in front of him. About half a dozen squirrels appeared in the moonlight and ate the crumbs. So far so good."

"Next he threw some pieces of bread on the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue right next to the park. This time the squirrels didn't do anything. They looked at the bread crumbs, and they looked at the bag, and they looked longingly at Henry, but they didn't move.

"These squirrels have got to be conditioned, Henry said to himself. This is going to be a big job."

The Editor started to say something, but the Writer cut him off. "Wait a second," he said. "I'm getting to the good part."

"Well, Henry was a mighty persistent man and an intelligent one too. He didn't come to the park every night, but he did come three and four times a week. And by the end of May he had two squirrels, a big brown one and a smaller grey one, eating bits of bread right off the pavement.

"He really worked at it. He got to know the beats of the policemen and to avoid them. He found that a mixture of bread crumbs and mixed nuts was better than crumbs alone.

"Gradually, gradually, gradually he began to coax the squirrels across Fifth Avenue, laying for them a path of crumbs and nuts.

"By the second week in June he had done it. Three squirrels, eating as they went, crossed onto the opposite curb, whirled around and darted back into the park.

"After that, somehow it got easier. By the end of June six squirrels had crossed both Fifth and Madison Avenues, following a path of food before running back to the park.

"Then, some time around the middle of July, a funny thing happened. Henry started out with about twenty squirrels, but by the time he reached Third Avenue—across Fifth, Madison, Park and Lexington—there were only a half dozen left. It seemed that the rest had become lost in the dark.

"Well, just about two days after that, a little feature story appeared in one of the New York tabloids. A grocer over on 79th Street reached up with one of those long poles for a can of beans and picked up a full grown squirrel instead.

"The squirrels, although in a minor way, figured in the New York mayoralty campaign of 1957. Among many other short-comings, it was pointed out, the party in power had done nothing about the 'ever-growing presence of these furry creatures which are fast becoming a major league public nuisance."

"For their part, the squirrels were conditioning themselves far more rapidly than even Henry had imagined possible. For over half a century in Central Park they had been observing people and storing the knowledge in their fertile little minds the way they did acorns in the winter. They still liked nuts and bread crumbs, but now they learned there were innumerable other delicacies, like candy and meatballs and seedless grapes that could be found in supermarkets and open refrigerators. They began to like the feel of sofas and the idea of air-conditioning in the summer.

"By the spring of 1958, the squirrels were literally everywhere—riding the elevators, sitting in the backs of automobiles, crouching under and on top of office desks, in the subways, movie theaters and bookshops. And all the time... multiplying.

"In fact the only place they weren't was in Central Park. And pretty soon people from all over the city found their way into the park for a bit of peace and quiet. As a matter of fact, whole families began to move there for good.

"Well, anyway, that's the general idea," the Writer said abruptly.

The Editor looked at him. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

The Editor started to pace back and forth in front of the desk. "Imagination, yes, but basic believability and coherence of explanation, no. Even in fantasy, even in science-fiction, there must be a beginning premise which is only a small-scale extension of truth. Now it seems to—"

"No?"

"Of course I may be wrong. The story certainly holds continued interest and after all there are plenty of other magazines that—"

He stopped. The Writer was going out the door.

It turned out to be one of those afternoons. The third sequence of the current serial was nowhere near up to the standard of the first two. The Advertising Department tried to put over a tie-in promotion that was unethical to say the least. The month's readership reports were disturbing, and the new cover design was clearly wrong.

At 5:15 the office cleared out, and the Editor started to work on the speech he was to deliver at the Magazine Council's quarterly meeting on Thursday. By 9:30 he had it outlined satisfactorily.

It was a warm May night, and he decided to walk home. He started along Fifth Avenue at 53rd Street, then met Central Park at 59th where a vendor was selling a wide variety of shelled nuts. As he

walked alongside the park, he tried out different beginnings to the speech. "I want to talk tonight about responsibility"... "Someone once said that an editor is"...

He stopped at 79th Street, right next to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and looked out on the park. It was a glowing night, and both the moon and streetlights were bright. The wind seemed to catch only the tops of the trees.

Suddenly he heard a crackling of underbrush, and a man stepped timidly from behind a tree on the inside edge of the park.

"The Editor felt in a decidedly be-kind-to-people mood. He hopped up onto a bench and waved his bushy tail at the man good naturedly. "I'm sorry. I just don't have anything for you to eat," the Editor explained good naturedly. The man looked him up and down; then, afraid, darted back behind the tree.

The Editor considered the park at 82nd Street. There was no wall or fence. The green of the grass simply met the grey of the Fifth Avenue sidewalk. For a long moment the Editor scratched his head with his tail in meditation.

"Come to think of it, *why don't the people ever leave the park?*" he said right out loud.

queen of clothes

by...F. L. WALLACE

To Ben she was a symbol, the kind that would be of more interest to the youthful Benvenuto Cellini than to Freud.

The coins slipped out of his hand. One he caught in midair, but the others fell and rolled along the ground. At the risk of being trampled, he stood to pick them up. A knee caught him in the back and he stood up, a small card in his fingers.

The man who had collided with him disappeared into the crowd. Ben Durango started after him and then shrugged. It was an accident. Better leave it at that.

The card in his hand was an accident too. Before throwing it away, curiosity impelled him to examine it. Stepped on by countless feet and dirty, it was an invitation. A society event, and he recognized the name of the guest of honor.

Ben Durango had come to earth from Venus. Third generation, he accepted Venus as home; to him the strange and exciting names were Paris, New York, Los Angeles. Sunlight on city streets, and who from the murky planet ever heard of that? Beaches at which anyone could swim without body armor and without fear of swift underwater death. And

F. L. Wallace, author of ADDRESS CENTAURI (Gnome Press, \$3.) returns to these pages with this short-short describing the unusual and rather intimidating Alette, Queen of Clothes sometime "the day after tomorrow", who could be all things to all men and had a secret . . .

at night there were often stars overhead.

It had been wonderful, all of it, but in the six months that he had been here, certain things exceeded his grasp. On Venus he had dreamed of oranges, hot jazz, cognac—and Alette, Queen of Clothes. Lesser pleasures he had been able to enjoy, but on his meager salary he could not hope to meet Alette.

And yet the invitation was now in his hand, and she was the guest of honor. He put his treasure carefully away and changed his mind about calling on the brown haired girl from the lab he worked in. Instead he went home and spent half the night sponging the card, restoring it to the original condition.

Men were there too, but he didn't notice them. Mostly there were women, dressed up to this and down to that. Women, naturally beautiful or unnaturally so, with laughing eyes or frigid—those who dressed with imagination, and those who suspected men had none. He tried to guess the dresses created by Alette and couldn't.

He saw her suddenly and forgot the others. There was a stir when she came in—as always. No matter how much anyone paid, the best designs she kept for herself. There were stories of women who protested her practice, and who nevertheless came back

repeatedly. At her level there was no competition.

Ben Durango, twenty five and an obscure chemist, knew what there was to know about her. He had everything written, and had heard much that, because of laws, couldn't be committed to print.

To him she was a symbol, the kind that would be of more interest to the youthful Benvenuto Cellini than to Freud.

At thirty five she was the top fashionist. Whatever the honor meant to her, the age she ignored. She appeared as old as her mood was, sixteen sometimes, but never forty. She hadn't married, and wasn't on the verge of it. No one had ever accused her of monogamy. She took men as she wanted, and discarded in the same way. No man protested, and if women did, she had her weapons. It was not for nothing that she was Queen of Clothes.

Durango left the woman he'd been trying to speak to and followed Alette. She was wearing a smoky blue something. What it was he really didn't notice.

He kept his distance. When she accepted a martini, so did he, farther down the line. When she stepped out on the terrace, he slipped around to another door and watched her covertly. He had thought her gown was cut for cleavage, but it wasn't; soft bronze

colored fabric came over her shoulders as protection from the evening breeze.

She went inside and he waited for a few seconds, losing her momentarily, principally because her gown had changed. It was now a dazzling white. It hadn't really changed of course. That was a trick of design, one that her competitors couldn't match.

Next she danced with some distinguished man. It took Durango sometime to recognize him, president of Tri-Planetary Rockets. It was rough competition, and though he wanted to speak to her, he decided he ought to wait. He stayed in the background and tried not to let her out of his sight.

Later in the evening, much later than he realized, she disappeared completely. One moment she was there, and the next, she wasn't. He began hunting for her. A girl in a demure red dress followed him; normally he would have been interested, but this was no time to be diverted. He went out to the terrace, but Alette wasn't there.

Neither was she in any of the other places he had access to. The garden was a possibility, but one that might be embarrassing to investigate. He decided in favor of it anyway and went out. Behind him there was still the girl in the red dress. He got a better glimpse of

her and stopped abruptly.

She was quite close to him. "You've been following me all evening," she murmured. "It's only fair that I do the same for you."

"Alette," he stammered.

They were close to a light. It shone on her hair and shoulders, soft but distinct. He hadn't been misled by all that he had heard. This was the way she looked. "I'm accustomed to men following me. I don't actually mind," she said. "You stood out in the crowd. You're the one in the rented suit."

He hadn't known it was that obvious. It seemed big for him now, or too small, or both. He gazed at her miserably and swallowed.

"A charming touch of gray in your hair," she said lightly. "Nevertheless you're very young. That's all right—youth has its place." She added thoughtfully. "Your hair isn't really black. It's dark blue and gray. The two factors add up to Venus."

Not many people from earth knew the slightly altered characteristic of Venusians that well. He shook the fog out of his mind. She was speaking to him, which was more than he had hoped for, and there was nothing he could say. One word he could think of. "Alette." He tried to say it ardently, but it came out as a croak.

"Of course you know me," she said sharply. "And you

ought to know I don't have much use for lovesick louts. Unless it isn't that. You may be merely intimidated." She touched his arm. "Say something witty. If you can't, tell me how much you admire my gown, how beautiful it is."

His awkwardness vanished at the touch. He wasn't tall or handsome, and there wasn't any way to repair those defects. Neither could he be witty; he had spent more time dreaming than with conversation. But he could be daring; he could say something that had puzzled him.

He glanced at her. The dress was still red, but it was no longer cut for a school girl. He smiled, and Cellini would have recognized the expression. "I could tell you that you're a good designer, but you know that.

"The truth is that you are good, but you're better as an electronic engineer. You can fool the others, but the clothing you wear yourself—

all the changes—that's merely an electronic trick." He took a deep breath and hoped she didn't notice. "The dress you are now wearing, that doesn't—."

She put her fingers on his lips and stopped him. It was her turn to smile. "That's very clever, but I don't talk about it. And you mustn't." Her hand slid down to his arm. "I would like to see you again. At my apartment, tomorrow evening?" And she went inside.

He sat down. It was cool in the garden, but he didn't mind. He had won out. Tomorrow evening and after that until he too was discarded. But that was in the future and he didn't mind as long as he knew in the beginning.

But the electronic trick he had started to speak of. His mind had penetrated what his eyes hadn't been able to. From her actions he knew it was true. The queen of clothes—wore none.

A NEW YORKER'S PLEA

Humanoids, Bems and Hyperdrive—
 These are things on which I thrive!
 Robots, Androids, Vega 4—
 These things, too, I don't abhor.
 Cosmic rays and Things from Space
 Are all things I'll gladly face!

But one thing I do ask. Please!
 Keep me out of the Subway Squeeze!

Harold Semos

no
bems
allowed

by...WALT ERICKSON

Why had this man posed as an Android? Was there a sinister reason behind this?

I WAS sitting in my office reading one of those two-bit detective novels, having nothing else to do for the moment, and sipping absently at a tall glass of amber fluid. The neon sign outside cast flickering shadows around my tastefully furnished office while my soft reading lamp gently laid a diffused glow around my leather easy chair. It was one of those one in a thousand nights when you just can't bring yourself to go home.

I didn't want to go home anyway because lately I've done nothing but catch hell from my wife.

I was up to chapter three and already my hero had been beaten up four times, once seriously, and was invited to three different apartments by three lovely blondes. It was just an average story but I was getting burned up because we private eyes just don't work that way. Actually, we're a home-loving lot, very much averse to being beaten up, and rarely, if ever, see a beautiful blonde, much less meet one, professionally or otherwise.

One thing I'll say for this boy, though, he didn't have a

A month ago her husband had come home with an Irish Setter — peculiar, since he didn't care for dogs. He began to act strangely soon afterwards and she realized he was in the hands of alien monsters. The author, who admits to once not breathing for 17 hours, lives in Camden, N.J.

beautiful private secretary and that sort of brought him down to my level because I couldn't even afford an ugly one.

I laid aside my book to tighten the collar on my beer when my door opened silently and a woman forced her way through the ankle deep rug toward my desk, making soft swishing sounds as she walked. I noticed she had on black suede shoes, and as I looked her over slowly I saw that she was also wearing a new shade of leg gilt, a neat black pin-stripe suit, white blouse with ruffles, a pearl necklace and beautiful auburn hair.

She was gorgeous.

"Are you Morgan Cartwright, the private eye?" she asked, giving me the once over and apparently approving.

I wasn't surprised at her approving as I'm six-four in my stockings and blessed with thick, wavy blonde hair, a sort of golden blonde that glows when the sun strikes it. Right now it had a reddish gold hue from the neon sign. My dangerous mouth and steel blue eyes belie the fact that I'm an easy going person until aroused. My two hundred and eight pounds are well distributed and there isn't an ounce of fat.

I nodded slowly when she repeated her question. I looked her over again and I'll be darned if she didn't look even more gorgeous this time.

She was the kind who grows on you apparently. I motioned her to a chair.

"I'm afraid this is a rather awkward situation, Mr. Cartwright," she began. "You see, I have reason to believe that my husband, Jack Webley, is in the hands of aliens. Monsters, Mr. Cartwright." She dabbed at her deep blue eyes with a dainty lace handkerchief.

"There, there," I said. "Take it easy."

"I'm sorry," she sniffed.

"Suppose we begin at the beginning," I said kindly. "Just take it from the top and tell me everything and anything that comes to mind. From time to time I'll interject a pertinent question or two." I settled back in my chair.

"It began about a month ago, Mr. Cartwright," she began.

"Call me Morgan," I smiled.

She smiled back at me. Her teeth were gorgeous.

"And you must call me Lattitia," she said softly.

I nodded and she went on.

"Well, about a month ago my husband came home with an Irish Setter, which in itself was peculiar, because he doesn't particularly care for dogs. He began to grow cool towards me. He would sit in his chair with the dog at his feet for hours, not saying a word. When I tried to talk to him I couldn't get through. It was like he was hypno-

tized." She dabbed at her lovely eyes again.

"Please go on," I said.

"Four days ago, while the dog was asleep, he suddenly looked at me—"

"Your husband?"

"Yes. He looked bewildered and there was a strange light in his eyes. He suddenly leaned forward and said, 'He's got me Tish, but I'm fighting.' And then he went back in his trance."

"And that is when your suspicions were confirmed," I said.

"Yes. I was terribly frightened. I didn't know where to turn. I'm only a woman, you know."

I nodded.

"And then two nights ago, early Tuesday evening, he put on his hat and said he was going to take the dog for a walk. He said, 'We have some business on Third Avenue.' He didn't come home Tuesday night or Wednesday night, either. When he didn't come home today I grew terribly worried. I was beside myself with anxiety. So this evening I started to walk around town, hoping that I might find him." She broke down again. I handed her my handkerchief. Hers was sopping wet.

"Did you call the hospitals? The police?" I asked. She was a very intelligent girl, but in her state of anxiety it might easily have slipped her mind.

"Yes," she answered; "but of course he wasn't at any

of those places. I had the theory that he may have won his fight with the alien over control of his mind and that it left him with temporary amnesia or something. I don't know what to do, Morgan," she said softly, "I just don't know."

I lit cigarettes for both of us and handed one to her.

"Thank you."

"The question now, of course, is why did you come to me?" I blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. I felt a twinge of pride. It was the first time I had gotten one.

"I was just walking aimlessly, my mind in a fog, when I saw your neon sign. I couldn't go to the police for several reasons. This story is so wildly improbable that they would laugh at me. You see, I am an Android and the police espers couldn't peep me to see if I were telling the truth. So when I saw your sign, 'Morgan Cartwright, Private Investigator, Registered Esper', I walked in."

I nodded but said nothing. I had noticed the small blue "A" on her forehead when she came in. It was true that an Android cannot be peeped which is one reason why the police don't care too much for them. I was certain that she really was an Android for I tried to peep her and drew a blank. That much of her story was true, at any rate.

"Just what do you want me to do about it, Mrs. Webley?"

She stubbed out her cigarette.

"I am prepared to pay you one hundred dollars to find my husband," she said, opening her pocketbook and placing the bills on the desk. "And another hundred if you get rid of the alien."

"All right," I said. "I'll have to have a description of them. A picture will do nicely, if you have one."

"Yes, here you are."

I looked at it and grunted. The picture was slightly out of focus but I could see that he was a very ordinary looking man, about six feet tall, I judged, dark hair, and an Irish Setter standing beside him.

"You mentioned he was going somewhere on Third Avenue," I said. "Any idea where?"

"Yes. It was probably Harry's Bar and Grille. He went there quite often."

"Uh-huh," I said. "And what is the setter's name?"

"Mike."

"All right," I said, getting up. I grabbed my hat and checked my cannon. It was time for action. I scooped the bills into my coat pocket and grabbed her by the arm.

"Come on," I said, "I'll get you a cab and then I'm off to Harry's Bar and Grille. Gotta see a man about a dog."

"Naw, Harry don't work here any more," the bartender said. "He sold the joint to me two years ago. I kept the sign

because my name's Harry, too."

I showed him the picture. "Do you know this man?" I asked.

He looked it over carefully before replying. "It's a little out of focus, but I recognized the dog. Can you imagine that," he said, "The guy's been coming here for over a year, never have any trouble with him, a quiet kind of guy, you know what I mean, and all of a sudden, about a month ago, he starts bringing this pooch in with him. I don't get sore or nothing because he's a good customer, but I point out, friendly like, you know what I mean that there ain't no pooches allowed in here. I got my other customers to think about."

I looked around. There was no one in the place.

"Go on," I said.

"Well sir," he continued, shining the spot in front of me, "at that he gets kind of huffy and says 'Where I go, he goes.' And I swear that dog musta known what was going on because he growled at me."

He polished a glass and I got the hint.

"Give me a bourbon and soda," I said, "and get something for yourself."

"Thanks mate, you're a real sport," he said and poured two bourbons.

"Caveat emptor," I said.

"E Pluribus Unum."

"Have another."

"Thanks. Well, to continue," he said, leaning on the bar "we finally agreed that when the place got crowded he'd take the pooch home. It isn't that I don't like dogs, because I do, but a barstool is a barstool."

"Tell me, Harry," I said, "have you seen him this week?" I was playing it cool.

"Matter of fact I did," he said. "Last Tuesday night he come in to see if I could fix a traffic ticket for him. I told him I couldn't because they just put in those new no fix tickets. I told him I couldn't fixed it last week or next week, but not this week because the heat was on from the mayor and this week we gotta take it easy."

I didn't know if this information was significant or not but I filed it away anyhow. I peeped him to see if he was holding anything back, but he was clean. It was unethical, but a little peeping now and then doesn't hurt anyone.

"I don't like to seem more stupid than I am, Harry," I said, "but why would Jack come to you to get a ticket fixed?"

"Because I'm a committeeman, that's why." He leaned closer. "Look," he said. "you know the guy's an Android, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, I'm a member of the Action Committee, see," he said. "We elected a mayor and a majority on the city

council last election. But it was close. So close that a coupla hundred votes coulda swung it the other way. Now the problem is, last year the Supreme Court ruled that the Androids got the right to vote and since the other party is in control in Washington, we figure the Androids will vote for them if we don't do something about it. Now don't get me wrong, I'm in favor of the Androids voting, but my job right now is to get them to vote for us."

"So you fix their traffic tickets."

"Right. And any other little favor we can do. I'da done it for Jack anyway, if I could, because I like him."

"OK, Harry," I said. I laid a ten on the bar. "Did he say anything about where he was going when he was in last Tuesday?"

"Yeah. When I couldn't help him with the ticket he asked me where the nearest tattooing parlor was."

"Where did you send him?"

"Uncle Billy's around on Fourth Street."

I grabbed my hat. "Thanks a lot, Harry," I said.

"Don't mention it."

Uncle Billy pushed his spectacles up on his nose and squinted at the picture. He wavered back and forth slightly.

"Yes, I seen this feller," he wheezed in a creaky voice. "Come in, let me see now, was

it last night? No, it couldn't have been last night. Last night I went to a picture show. Gene Autry. You should've seen that feller corral them redskins. Why, at one point there—"

"Uncle Billy," I said, "was it Tuesday night he was here?"

"Tuesday night? Tuesday night?" He pulled several times at his dirty beard. "Let's see now. Tuesday night. I remember I did a heart with a dagger in it. Pretty thing it was. Bright red and a gold dagger. One of my best. You interested in a heart with a dagger in it?"

"Not right now, Uncle Billy. This fellow came in with a dog, probably. Think about it Uncle Billy. A man with a dog?"

"It had 'Mother' lettered across the bottom."

"What did?"

"The heart with the dagger. Did you say you wanted a gold dagger or a green dagger?"

"I don't want any dagger at all, Uncle Billy," I said. "I'm looking for a man and a dog. They came in here Tuesday night."

"What kind of dog?"

"An Irish setter."

"Oh sure, now I remember. Tall feller. Wanted me to take something off his forehead. That was just after the feller with the heart with the dagger in it."

"What was it he wanted

taken off, Uncle Billy," I asked.

"It was a blue 'A'," he said.

"Did you remove it?"

"Easy as pie," he cackled. "I remember one time—"

"It wasn't a real Android symbol, then?" I asked.

"Course not," he snorted.

"Everybody knows you can't take off a real Android symbol. I know, 'cause one time I—"

"Did he say why he wanted it off?"

"He said it was part of a college initiation. He hadda pose as an Android for a while."

"OK, thanks again, Uncle Billy," I said and started for the door.

"Oh say, young feller," he called, "I forgot something."

"Yes?"

He shrugged out from behind the counter. "I got a sale on clipper ships this week. Half price. For an extra dollar I throw in a dolphin."

"No thanks, Uncle Billy," I laughed. "Maybe next time."

"OK, young feller, but if you get a chance to see that Gene Autry picture—"

"I'll try to make it, Uncle Billy. So long."

"So long."

I LEFT Uncle Billy's and turned east on Fourth Street. I crossed the avenue and into the park where I shooed seven sleeping pigeons off a bench, sat down and lit a cigarette. It was pretty dark.

Why, I said to myself, would a man wish to disguise himself as an Android? I thought of the answer. Mrs. Webley was very beautiful and there is still a law forbidding marriage between Androids and humans. Mrs. Webley was plenty of reason for becoming an Android. But then why have the symbol taken off? Obviously, because he couldn't get the traffic ticket fixed. When he appeared in court they would take his retinal prints as a matter of course. If he appeared in court with that "A" on his forehead, when the prints came back the fat would be in fire. The marriage would be declared void and no more beautiful Mrs. Webley. The only reason he had gotten away with it at all was because they don't take your prints when you get married. You hand a man your money and he gives you a paper. But what about the mind block? An Android cannot be peeped so he would have to acquire one somehow. And he must have or he would have been found out by this time. And he couldn't appear in court as a human with a mind block because the Judge would naturally be an esper and he might begin to wonder when he couldn't peep him. So he would have to have the block removed temporarily. And he couldn't go home without the symbol on his forehead be-

cause his wife would surely notice.

I knew now what had happened. Tuesday night he had the symbol removed because he couldn't get the ticket fixed. He must have holed up in a hotel and Wednesday he saw the psychiatrist who gave him the block and had it removed. It's against the law to install mind blocks but you can always find a quack psychiatrist if you look hard enough. So last night he holed up again. Traffic tickets always take three days so he would be in court tomorrow. I could walk around town tonight checking all the hotels and flop houses but I knew where to find him tomorrow so I didn't bother. I flipped away my cigarette and walked out of the park. I flagged a cab and settled down in the back seat. But what's all this about an alien, I thought.

THE NEXT morning I was in front of the courthouse when it opened at eight. I let Jack and the dog go in unmolested and went across the street for a cup of coffee. I would have to wait for a couple of hours so I thought it best to keep my strength.

I sauntered nonchalantly across the street about five of ten and took up my position next to the Army recruiting poster. In a few moments Jack and the dog came out and stood on the curb, evi-

dently looking for a cab. I strolled over, a tight clamp on my mind. I didn't want the dog to spot me. I got behind them and said, "Hello Jack." The setter tried to whirl but I gave him a picture of the gun my pocket with my finger on the trigger. He knew I meant business and subsided with a low growl. "Let him go!" I commanded. He growled again and I gave him another picture of the gun. He let go.

"Hello Jack," I said again.

He turned around, his face a mixture of bewilderment and fear. He looked me in the eye. "Do I know you, old man?" he said.

"That's hardly the reaction one would expect from one who has just been rescued from an alien," I said.

He shook his head. "Terribly sorry, old man, but I've had a considerable shock. Please forgive me."

"You're forgiven," I said. Let's get back to Latitia. Give me the leash." I signalled to a passing cab and he made a U turn and pulled up in front of us.

"But I can't go home like this, old chap. I've just remembered I've had the bloody symbol removed."

I pushed him in the cab and gave the driver the address. We roared off with the dog between us. I gave him another flash of the gun to keep him quiet.

"Well," I said as we settled back, "so you remember what

went on while this creature had control of you, eh? Did he tell you who or what he is?"

"Oh yes," Jack said, completely recovered now, "he's a Denebian. And watch out for him, he's tricky."

"Don't worry. He's helpless. I've paralyzed his transmitter."

"His transmitter, old boy?"

"One of his brain centers, actually," I replied, "but for convenience we refer to it as the transmitter. It works pretty much the same."

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "I mean, how on earth did you do that?"

"It's easy," I grinned, "when you're an esper."

"Oh."

We rode in silence the rest of the way. As we braked to a halt in front of his apartment Jack assumed his worried look. "I'm afraid this is going to be quite a shock to Latitia," he said. "I mean, coming home with an alien on the end of a leash and my Android symbol gone."

"Quit worrying," I said, "she loves you, doesn't she?"

"Well I should hope so."

"Then forget it. She won't care if you're Android or human. You can get your symbol back later."

"Still, it will probably prove unnerving."

I paid the driver and we walked into the lobby and over of the elevator. I still had Mike on his leash. "And as for the alien," I said, as we

went up, "she sent me out to get you away from it."

"Good girl," he said.

We walked into the apartment. Latitia was watching Ernie Kovacs on television. She was wearing shorts and a tight halter. She jumped up when we entered, her eyes wide. "Jack!"

"It's all right, Tish," he said, smiling.

"You're rid of that terrible creature?" she asked, her eyes filling.

He patted her on the shoulder. "It's all over, dear. Mr. Cartwright took care of the whole thing. He has the bloke's transmission jammed or something, isn't that right, Cartwright?"

"Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Webley," I grinned.

She tore herself from his grasp and took a snub nosed .32 from the desk drawer before I knew what was happening and let the dog have it between the eyes. "Dirty Denebian!" she hissed.

"You shouldn't have done that, Mrs. Webley," I said mildly. "He could probably have proven to be a valuable prisoner to the FBI. We don't know whether he is one of an army or a scout or what."

"Oh, but we do," Jack said. "He told me. Or rather, at certain times we would talk to each other. No, dash it all, that isn't quite right either. What I'm trying to say is, there were periods when we would share our memories.

What I knew, he knew, and vice versa. During one of those periods I learned that he was a Denebian named Brecta and he assumed the shape of a dog because he couldn't manage anything complicated like a human being. He was the only one here."

Latitia smirked. "Stupid Denebian."

"May I see your gun, Mrs. Webley," I said.

"It's just an ordinary snub nosed .32," she shrugged, handing it over.

"Thank you," I said, pocketing it and drawing my cannon, "now would you mind standing perfectly still? Would you stand over against that wall, Jack?" I indicated with a toss of my head. I didn't take my eyes from Latitia. My cannon was pointing right at her belly button.

"I say," he began.

"Keep quiet, Jack. Now, Mrs. Webley," I said, "would you mind telling me now you know the dog was a Denebian?" I said it kind of hard, like I learned in eye school. "I don't recall anyone mentioning it yet you knew what he was. That was a mistake, Mrs. Webley," I said gently enough, "but you made a bigger mistake. Androids don't have belly buttons, Mrs. Webley."

"Now see here, old man," Jack said, "you jolly well leave my wife's belly button out of this."

I ignored him. "What are you, Mrs. Webley? Cercan? Aldabaranean?"

"Aldabaranean," she said proudly.

"You were rather unfortunate, Mrs. Webley. Shall I call you Mrs. Webley?"

"No. My name is Meris."

I bowed slightly. "Well then Meris," I continued. "It was really unlucky of you to pick me of all the private eyes in this city. You see, I was looking for you. I must admit though, that I did not know who you were when you hired me to find Jack. Your disguise was quite perfect as long as you had your clothes on. But I would have found out sooner or later, wouldn't I?" I grinned evilly. I knew all about Aldabaranean.

She ignored me with frosty silence.

"But why," I continued, "did you want someone to find your husband at all? Surely he didn't mean that much to you."

"He meant nothing to me," she said icily. "I just didn't want that dirty Denebian to get out of my sight."

"Good Lord!" Jack said and covered his face with his hands.

"One more thing," I said. "Why did you choose to become an Android? Because no one can peep an Android?"

"Yes," she answered, "I couldn't take the chance." She made a lunge toward me but I

was too fast for her. I let her have the .45 slug; she fairly exploded.

I put away my gun. "You better get lost, Jack," I said. "Somebody might ask questions. She's quite messy."

He mopped his forehead. "It has been rather hectic," he said weakly.

I said, so long and closed the door. I let Jack hear me clump down the hall. I peeped him. He was laughing heartily to himself. What a great lot of geese, he was thinking. The Denebians, Aldabaraneans, all stupid. Even the greatest detective on earth didn't suspect that I, Larnyo, am a member of the Venerian spy ring. These stupid earth people don't deserve to rule. He hummed gaily. I shall have much to report when our leaders come next week, he thought.

I rang for the elevator. When I got back to the office I'd have to look up that FBI flyer all us private eyes got on the Venerian spy ring. That was really a good description of Jack there.

The elevator arrived and I got in. I felt a little sorry for Jack. He really tried so hard. But he wasn't as smart as he thought he was. That's the trouble with people. Everybody thinks he is smarter than he actually is. The Denebian thinking he could take us when he couldn't even assume the guise of a human. The Venerian thinking he

could take us when he himself was taken by a Denebian. Not only that. Jack didn't even know his own wife was an Al-dabaranean and that was the sad part for he honestly loved her. But he didn't know enough about us to be an Android from the beginning. And Latitia knew what Jack was, and spotted the Denebian right off. She was clever, but not clever enough to play in our league. She was pumping Jack's hard earned information from him and adding it on her own. That was probably why she married him, and why she was so anxious when she thought the Denebian had taken him

away. And the poor stupid Denebian wandering around looking like an Irish setter and hoping to be picked up by a human but gets picked up by Jack and finds out too late he's made a mistake. Ah, well!

The elevator stopped and I got out and walked across the lobby. I'd ring up my FBI contact and let them take it from here. They'll watch Jack the rest of the week and clean up the whole ring.

"Cab, sir?" the doorman asked.

"No thanks," I said, "I'd rather walk."

"It's a beautiful day for it sir," he said.

OVERHEARD ON THE BUS

"Yes, I know Lowell said life was dying on Mars. And yes, I know some of those Science Fiction writers, ever since the days of H. G. Wells, have been dreaming up all kinds of monsters that are supposed to live in underground cities on Mars. They've even located a few of these cities—in their stories.

"What folks don't seem to realize, though, is that Martians are just people like you. They're really not any different. Well, yes—living in caves, under artificial light, for a hundred thousand years or so, has naturally given them a complexion slightly different from earthfolks but, honestly, that's about it.

"Yes, of course they're telepaths—that's the word, I think. They usually know what the other fellow is thinking. On Mars they don't have much need for talking anyway. They just think "at" the person they want to talk to, and he or she thinks back "at" them. It's simple, and more practical in desert country.

"Oh, you think I'm sort of making this up?

"Come now! Why should I be doing that? I ought to know what I am talking about. I'm a Martian myself after all!

**next
week,
east
venus**

by...ROBERT K. OTTUM

**Who said there was no life
on Venus? Man — that cat
was so wrong, so wrong**

HE WIGGLED his fingers in the air like Louis Armstrong, picked up the horn and blew the bridge from Blues in the Night.

He broke it off cleanly on the high note and said, all in the same breath, "See? It's like a national anthem and when it's played, the people all salute by shouting *Go. Man, Go!*"

And the girl on the divan smiled. She patted the cushion next to her and motioned him over.

"Welcome home, darling," she said. "Are you certain that's all you did on Earth ... I mean, learn to play this strange horn and speak in this new jargon? No girls? You were true?"

"True." He mumbled it into the soft hollow of her neck. "Man. And someone once said there was no life on Venus." He held her away at arm's length and smiled.

The haze of light from the window behind her made her braids look like soft gold cord. And framed by the window he could see the city stacked up neatly around the space port in the center. Behind that, with its polished

Robert Ottum, a staff writer on the Salt Lake Tribune, contributes the present story to the folklore on Venus. Purists will possibly deplore his return to the traditionalist picture of Venus, but you can't help wondering what would happen if a real gone guy returned to South Venus!

glass all agleam, was the Venus Sea Wall, breathing gently with the sea.

She pouted. "Who said?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmm... Who said what?"

"That there was no life on Venus?"

"Some cat on Earth." He snapped his fingers. "Man, how wrong can you be?"

"And the... ah, the horn?"

"It's George. I mean, ain't it the end, the craziest? Look, maybe you don't dig me, doll, but that high trill sort of hits you where you live. It's a big thing with me, that horn. Naturally, we've never heard anything like it because..."

The high hum of the inter-city monitor interrupted, its voice seeping from the walls around them.

"Clive," it said. "Guardsmen Clive. Report to the Central at once. Guardsman Clive, report to..." The message-relay system repeated the order three times, then fell silent, waiting to pick up the answer from somewhere in the city.

"So all right already. I read you loud and clear." He began shrugging into his tunic while talking back to the wall speaker. "And tell ol' Central I'm as good as there." He wheeled around, kissed her on the forehead and grinned in a flash of teeth. He walked to the door and then looked back over his shoulder.

"And when I get through at Central, I'll teach you something else I learned on Earth," he said. "It's called a step-over toe hold."

He closed the door on her puzzled look, slipped the horn under his arm and cocked his helmet down into a non-regulation slant over one eye.

He whistled the counterpoint to Jazz Me Blues on the way to Central, heels clicking on the glass sidewalk, and followed it up with the down-home chorus from Muskrat Ramble. The twin robot sentinels flanking the Central Command office swiveled smoothly to open the huge door when he walked up.

Their single green eyes spotlighted him briefly, then clicked to amber, indicating he had been identified.

"Like two all-electric lions in front of the public library," he said. "Frantic."

Inside, at the lighted door he paused again, knowing his image was being flashed inside, where the Central would flick a switch.

The door slid quietly into the floor and he stepped into the chamber.

"Clive." The voice spoke accusingly. "Why haven't you reported to me before this? You know I detest being kept waiting."

He smiled and shrugged. "Man, I was just a cog on

that crazy Earth expedition," he said. "I mean, I figured the chief of the ship would check in all that jazz. All I did was goof around while your brainy boys were out gathering all that scientific data and all. Man, I'm just a switch-thrower on that crazy saucer crew..."

"The commander reported to me promptly," the Central said. "But I wanted also to hear from you. Where have you been since the ship returned?"

"I been over to my chick's pad across town. You know, an angel on the east side of heav..."

Central held up a hand; first, to stop the flow of words, then to beckon airily.

"Come and sit by me," she said, leaning forward. "I want to hear all about what you did on Earth." She looked at him, sleepy-lidded, toying with the flashing jewel at the junction of her breasts. "Come here."

He slumped on the cushions and dropped the horn on the floor. "I dig this sofa the most," he said. "You've added a little class to this joint since I left."

"I had hoped you would like it." Central traced the design on his tunic with her fingertips, then her hand slid slowly up to the back of his head. She moved in close and bit gently on the tip of his ear. "I redecorated with you in mind."

"Uh... about the trip." He said it explosively, sitting up and pushing her away. "You say you want a report. Well ... I played it real slow until I picked up all the Earth routine. You know, habits and speech and all. Then I heard the music. Man, it was the only thing. So I got me a job in this little knocked-out combo, see, just playing Dixie all night. I got kind of a theory about the music. I mean, it's something about the climate and pressures here on Venus: With my lungs I can play a trumpet like nobody ever heard. And they really flipped..."

The Central breathed hot in his ear.

"Kiss me," she said.

He ran a finger around his collar.

"... and so... uh, that's about all there is to report, Central," he said. "And when your information-gathering crew had all the dope on Earth they wanted, they contacted me and we took off. And here we..."

"Now. Kiss me."

She flowed in closer, the jewel cutting its sharp outlines into his chest. Her eyes were luminous, lips wet and half-parted. "You know I still feel that you're mine. And it is time that Central took a mate. Kiss me and Venus is yours."

"What a crazy... proposition." He turned his head to escape the hungry mouth,

and he was mumbling into her hair. "But y'all know I been spoken for, Central-doll. Uh, y'all, that's down-south talk. You see, the people down there, they all say you all..."

She pulled away, eyes flashing.

"Spoken for! You mean that... that creature with the braided hair. That little... you fool!"

She stood up, whirling around and her gown fell into clinging lines, moulded to her body. Clive looked away.

"I've always loved you," she said, softly again. "I thought this trip would cure it. But now I know the truth. You must be mine. Together we can be the Central here on Venus. The ruling power. Hand-in-hand, my love, we'll march together into the bright new future..."

"That's a great dramatic bit and you read your lines well." On the couch, Clive grinned again. "But you're playing to an empty house."

She whirled again, the great jewel swinging in an arc on its chains before falling back down into its cushioned slot. "Is that your final word?"

The tone of her voice made him look up, sharply.

He shrugged. "Man, that's it," he said.

"Then you die!" She made a quick move and there was the gun in her hand, all dull blue, glinting glass. "I'm going to melt you a bit at a time... slowly... and with

your last words you'll beg me to forgive, to take you back. For if I can't have you—no one shall."

He stood up.

"Next week, East Venus," he said. "Gad. I mean, this is an advanced civilization, compared with Earth. All the latest gimmicks. Robots. Everything glass. Guns that melt people. But, man, that kind of corny dialogue went out with high button..."

"Beg!" she commanded it.

"No," he said, simply. He stooped and picked up the horn.

Narrowing her eyes and using both hands to steady the gun, she raised it to arm's length and the bulb-like muzzle was pointing at his chest. The glass-conductor arcs slowly began changing hue; glowing first in pink, then gradually to a brighter red.

He wiggled his fingers in the air like Louis and took a deep breath.

"Man, I got to find out," he said. And he blew a low note.

The sharp blues beat swelled up and the clear, sharp sound of the trumpet rolled out over the city from the open window. The melody rode higher and higher, dropping occasionally with the two-beat catch of Dixieland.

The gun glowed up to a Venetian Red and the buttons on his tunic melted into

shapeless blobs. The fabric began to blacken and a wisp of smoke curled upwards.

And then he hit the high note and held it there—leaning back, feet planted apart. Its bell-clear sound throbbed across the city; and, hearing it, the people stopped to look up in terror.

Then it came: The first crack in the sea wall.

There was the sound of a million cymbals and the glass cracked into tiny lines like a

fantastic giant road map.

It buckled and the hungry seas came swelling in.

He broke it off cleanly on the high note and smiled.

"That's a great old bit," he said. The water churned up at their feet. "An old spiritual tune." He threw the horn down into the water.

"It's called: Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho and de Walls Came Tumbling..."

The water swallowed them up.

IN NEXT MONTH'S THRILL PACKED ISSUE—

Two Short Novels—

Veteran John Baroni fights Invaders from Outer Space in
HARRY HARRISON's suspense-filled **WORLD IN THE BALANCE**

A beautiful actress discovers a frightening secret in
ROBERT BLOCH's **TERROR OVER HOLLYWOOD**

Also—

We meet an attractive Martian, a suspected spy, in
MARK REINSBERG's **MY MARTIAN COUSIN**

Appleseed Corners has an extremely disturbing experience in
ROBERT F. YOUNG's **APE'S EYE VIEW**

Several live cobras add to a space trucker's problems in
HENRY BILLING's **SNAKES ALIVE**

A commuter takes a train to another world in
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and still more exciting stories in *your* **FANTASTIC UNIVERSE**
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MAGAZINE

shapes

in

the

sky

by...**CIVILIAN SAUCER
INTELLIGENCE**

The second of a series of authoritative columns on UFO sightings and reports, written specially for this magazine.

FROM TIME to time, during the past nine years, claims to have dispelled the mystery of the "flying saucers" have been put forward. If we are to believe these claimants, UFO (Unidentified Flying Objects) are now IFO (Identified Flying Objects).

One of the first of these "inside stories" was Silas Newton's, brought to public attention as early as the Fall of 1949 by the gossip columnist of a weekly newspaper. *1 According to Newton, the Air Force was secretly in possession of several flying saucers, which had been manned by little men from Venus, and were powered by "magnetic" engines whose principles were secretly known to earthly scientists. Shortly thereafter, radio commentator Henry J. Taylor divulged that flying saucers were "good news for the American public": they were "harmless" remote-controlled discs up to 250 feet in diameter, which "usually disintegrated in mid-air"; and a national weekly magazine disclosed that the reported phenomena were in reality re-

The article which follows should perhaps be called UFO NOT IFO. It is the work of the Research Section of Civilian Saucer Intelligence of New York, one of the "UFO research" groups mentioned in Ivan Sanderson's article in the February issue. CSI has a program of public lectures, publishes a News Letter, describing sightings and reports, for its members, and has an extensive file of material and photographs on the UFO.

volutionary jet-powered aircraft developed by the Navy. *2 Not to be outdone, *Look* magazine unveiled the secret of the saucers *twice*: In 1951, Dr. Urner Liddel, of the Office of Naval Research, revealed that "there is not a single reliable report of an observation which is not attributable to cosmic-ray balloons" (an "explanation" which had been suggested three years earlier by *Popular Science* *3. And during the rush of UFO sightings in the summer of 1952, Donald Menzel, professor of Astrophysics at Harvard University, finally disposed of the flying-saucer myth in the pages of *Look* *4; a year later, his explanations appeared in book form: "all reports of saucers result from unusual and unfamiliar conditions in the atmosphere. *5 At about the same time, earthshaking disclosures began to come from California. George Van Tassel received detailed telepathic information from space-people aboard flying saucers: "As you know, the fireballs are ships from Blaau; our so-called saucers are from Schiare." *6 And George Adamski actually conversed with a blond, long-haired, ski-suited Venusian, and made public numerous photographs he had taken of the Venusians' lampshade-like "scout ships" and cigar-shaped "Mother ships." *7 Since that time many others have come

forward to confirm or amend Adamski's well-received revelation.

There is no space here to discuss these claims in detail, but it will be noted that they all have one thing in common: they purport to account for *all* the phenomena by *one* sweeping generalization. But one need only look closely at the data to see that the phenomena known as "flying saucers" are of such widely divergent character that they cannot possibly all have the same origin or even be of the same nature. This remains true even after misidentifications and hoaxes have been eliminated. There are always cases that fly in the face of the explanations offered by the "inside-dope" peddlers.

In our first article (*Fantastic Universe*, March 1957), we described certain characteristic UFO shapes that have been frequently reported. The following accounts (not firsthand, but well-documented) will indicate the extreme differences in character exhibited by the phenomena.

Pot-Shot at a UFO

This is an observation at very close range of a structured object that is not identifiable with any of those prescribed by the "explainers." Not only was it seen, it was also heard—and fired upon.

On the night of January 29, 1953, Lloyd C. Booth, proprietor of a service station and

community store on Highway 701 eight miles north of Conway, South Carolina, had closed the store about 11:00 p.m. and had driven to his home, about a mile away. Shortly after arriving there, he heard his father's livestock raising a commotion in the barn. Booth grabbed a .22 calibre pistol and went outside to see what was disturbing the animals. Finding nothing, he was about to return to the house when he looked up and saw, just above the pinetrees, a peculiarly shaped object which was emitting a very low, almost inaudible, humming noise. The object was moving very slowly and Booth was easily able to follow it at a walk. He called out several times to try to arouse someone in the house, but his family had gone to bed and no one heard his shouts.

"I went directly into the woods, easily catching up with the object. I walked under it, around it, and viewed it from all sides. It was almost 24 feet long and about 12 feet across, was light greyish in color and was lit up on the inside. Two places in the front somewhat resembled cockpits and were glassed over. I could see a light on the inside... The back also had something resembling a cockpit with a stained glass over it. Light was coming through this section but I could not see through it. It

was about eight or ten feet deep. The front sloped upward from the base at an angle of about 60°, and the back sloped upward at an angle of 40° to 50°. The sides came straight down from the top for maybe four or five feet and then sloped outward and joined the base at about a 45° angle. Underneath... was something resembling a built-in 'wheel,' possibly three feet across, extending below the base in a crescent shape. There were no markings anywhere—I looked hard for identification."

Booth also stated that there were no visible means of support, no propeller, exhaust fumes, vapor trail or odor. The object continued to drift along slowly with a humming sound, with Booth following and watching it carefully. After twenty minutes, having given up hope of rousing anyone with his shouts, he fired his pistol straight up at the object from a distance of no more than 75 feet, aiming at the wheel-like projection underneath.

"I heard the bullet hit the object. It made a metallic sound and bounced off. A bare instant after the bullet hit, the object began making considerably more noise—like a large electric motor—and took off at a high rate of speed at about a 65° angle. It kept on the same course until it was completely out of sight." He added that the

noise was not as loud as a normal aircraft would have made.*8

Booth is a veteran of anti-aircraft service in War II, and is familiar with aircraft; it is hardly likely that he failed to identify a conventional craft. It certainly was no "meteorological phenomenon." High character recommendations from Booth's minister and other local residents support the reliability of his testimony. On the Air Force records, this case is apparently written off as a misidentification of a Navy blimp, according to correspondence received from Edward J. Ruppelt; however, there is little, if anything, in the witness's testimony that is consistent with such an "explanation." That the object was solid is proved by the fact that the bullet was heard to strike it. That it was under intelligent control is evident from its abrupt departure after being hit.

Kelly-Green Phantoms

A totally different type of UFO is represented by the "green fireballs" which have been seen in the southwestern United States and elsewhere—first in December 1948, and at intervals since then. Several extraordinary features of these objects appear to set them apart from true meteoritic phenomena: their brilliant color; their complete and invariable silence—

whether rushing across the sky in a horizontal trajectory, or exploding in a tremendous burst of green fire, or striking the ground; the absence of fragments upon impact; and—most unaccountable—their tendency to appear repeatedly over New Mexico (although they have been reported from other parts of the world also.*9

Let us also consider some sightings that are almost as amazing in quantity as in quality—"hosts," to use Charles Fort's term. The first, when enormous numbers of objects were seen by hundreds of people, is one of the best authenticated UFO cases on record.

Saucer Armada

Beginning at 10:30 on the morning of March 17, 1950, at least several hundred residents of Farmington, New Mexico, observed a large group of silvery, saucer-shaped objects (estimated at from 100 to 500 in number) in the sky directly over the town. Many of the published testimonies speak of the objects as resembling saucers or dinner plates, complete with a ring on the under side. Dozens of witnesses mentioned that one object, larger and flying lower than the rest, was red. These objects came into view at high speed, darted about at extreme speeds, hovered momentarily, and darted off

again. Several flights of objects maneuvered briefly over the city before streaking suddenly upward out of sight. Some objects flew on edge, some seemed to waver, and "vibration" in the flight patterns was reported by numerous witnesses. Some appeared to "play tag." Others streaked straight from horizon to horizon in a matter of seconds. Triangulation established their altitude at about 20,000 feet, and they were estimated to be as large as a B-29. Most of the objects disappeared within a few minutes, but a few were still seen, in groups of threes, an hour later. *10

"Gelatinous Hat-Crowns"

On May 16, 1808, at Skeninge, Sweden, about 4 p.m., the sun suddenly turned dull brick-red and there appeared upon the western horizon a great number of round dark-brown bodies, seemingly "the size of a hat-crown." They passed overhead, and disappeared over the eastern horizon. The procession lasted two hours. Often, when approaching the sun, these bodies seemed to link together, or were then seen to be linked together, in groups not exceeding eight; and, under the sun, they were seen to have tails "three or four fathoms long." Away from the sun, these tails were invisible. Occasionally, one fell to the ground. When the place of a

fall was examined, there was found a "soapy jelly," which soon dried to a film and vanished. *11

The Evaporating Purple Sphere

On September 26, 1950, about 10 p.m., Philadelphia Patrolmen John Collins and Joseph Keenan were driving their patrol car in the vicinity of Vare Boulevard and 26th Street when they saw, through the windshield, what at first looked like a parachute drifting slowly down from the sky. The object, at treetop level when it caught their attention, settled into an open field near 26th Street. After summoning Sergeant Joseph Cook, who arrived with Patrolman James Casper, the four men went into the field to examine the object, which was described as spherical and roughly six feet in diameter. From a few feet away they turned their flashlights on it; it "gave off a purplish glow, almost a mist, that looked as though it contained crystals." After a few moments Collins stepped forward and tried to pick the thing up. The part of the mass on which he laid his hands dissolved, leaving nothing but a slight, odorless, sticky residue. "I touched it and it just dissolved, leaving my fingers sticky."

Within half an hour the entire substance had evapor-

ated; it had been so light that the weeds on which it had rested remained unbent.

Now this could hardly have been a "meteorological phenomenon," any more than it could have been a "space ship." The gelatinous quality of the object suggests something more animal than mechanical. Readers will recall Ivan Sanderson's article *Fantastic Universe* for February, in which he suggests that some of the UFOs may be upper-atmosphere life forms. Of all the post-Fortean cases, the Philadelphia purple sphere is most suggestive of this possibility. *12

The point about the five cases we have described is simply this: that there seems to be no one theory that will account for all of them. What possible relationship can there be between the green fireballs of New Mexico, the Booth object in South Carolina, the Farmington armada of acrobatic disks, and the gelatinous masses of Sweden and Philadelphia? They seem to be totally unconnected phenomena; and the existence of such widely varying types of UFOs is the reason why we are compelled to consider more than one origin and explanation for these objects.

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- * 1. Frank Scully, in *VARIETY*, October 12 and November 23, 1949; *BEHIND THE FLYING SAUCERS*, Henry Holt & Co., 1950.
 - * 2. *U. S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT*, April 7, 1950.
 - * 3. *LOOK*, Feb. 27, 1951; *POPULAR SCIENCE*, May, 1948.
 - * 4. *LOOK*, June 17, 1952.
 - * 5. *FLYING SAUCERS*, by Donald Menzel, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 272.
 - * 6. *I RODE A FLYING SAUCER*, by George Van Tassel, New Age Publishing Co., Los Angeles, 1952, p. 23
 - * 7. *FLYING SAUCERS HAVE LANDED*, by Desmond Leslie and George Adamski, Werner Laurie, London 1953.
 - * 8. *THE STATE*, Columbia, South Carolina, February 7, 1953; *THE JOURNAL OF SPACE FLIGHT*, September 1953, (report of investigation by H. B. Ketchum).
 - * 9. For further details, see Chapter 4 of *THE REPORT ON UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS*, by Edward J. Ruppelt, Doubleday, 1956.
 - * 10. *ORIGINAL NEW MEXICAN NEWS SERVICE TELETYPE*, March 17, 1950.
 - * 11. *THE BOOKS OF CHARLES FORT*, Henry Holt & Co., 1941, p. 285, quoting *TRANSACTIONS OF THE SWEDISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES*, 1808-15.
 - * 12. *The Philadelphia INQUIRER*, September 27, 1950; *The Philadelphia SUNDAY EXPRESS*, October 1, 1950.

**pawns
of
tomorrow**

by ... NELSON BOND

Someone had to dream, to plan, to lay the groundwork, but what assurance did you have that your writhings could affect Tomorrow?

"THE TROUBLE with both of you," said Weissmann, "is that you have too much imagination. In a world of stark reality you permit yourselves the luxury of being romanticists."

Deftly, as he spoke, he cleared from the chess table a litter of odds and ends: a clipping from a current periodical, a dregs-dappled high-ball glass, scraps of memo paper scored with hen-tracks to be incorporated into a monograph on which he was currently working, a crumpled cigarette pack, the program of last week's Philharmonic concert.

"Too much imagination."

Springer glanced at Tom Ross, who shrugged. *I won't argue with him*, said Tom's arched eyebrows. *I came here to play chess*. So Springer accepted the challenge.

"Isn't that natural?" he demanded. "Tom is an architect, I'm a writer. Imagination is our stock in trade."

Weissmann, taking from its plush-lined inlaid chest the exquisitely carved set of chessmen which was his proudest possession, smiled gently.

A hauntingly persuasive story by Nelson Bond, one of the great names in the field, author of THE 31st OF FEBRUARY and other works. What is the dividing line between being lost in a dream world and actual awareness of truths only half-sensed by most of us? Who is to say what is animate and what is not — what breathes — what lives and what dies?

"I thought that would be your answer," he sighed. "Unfortunately it begs the issue. I accused you for what you are, not for what you do. As a means to an end one can, and should, employ the imaginative faculty to its fullest advantage. But you two are slaves to your own servant. Ross so depends on inspiration that he is lost without it. When his vagrant genius burns, he flames; when it fails, he is baffled and uncertain. He has so wholly surrendered to intuition that he has actually forgotten how to think."

"Just for that," announced Tom Ross, "I'll give you White and beat the socks off you."

"Accepted!" nodded Weissmann placidly. "I never refuse an advantage, my dear boy."

They started arranging their pieces. The thought occurred to Rufus Springer that Weissmann had deliberately tempted proffer of the White chessmen. But he rejected the notion. Weissmann needed no advantage over either Ross or himself. And his accusation had been hurled at both of them.

"How about me?" asked Springer.

Weissmann's eyes twinkled.

"You, Rufus? I hope you're not going to deny an excess of imagination? I know no one more hopelessly lost in

the dream world than yourself."

"Is there anything wrong in wanting to make this world a better place?" demanded Springer. "Someone has to dream, to plan, to lay the groundwork—"

"Someone," conceded Weissmann. "But you? Surely you don't delude yourself that your futile writings can alter that which must inevitably be?"

"Inevitably! Good Lord, Weissmann, don't tell me you've gone over to the predestinationists' camp?"

Weissmann winked drolly at Tom Ross. "You see?" he sighed. "Imaginative, yet inconsistent. He prefaces his tirade against religion with a sacerdotal invocation."

"Shut up, Rufe," said Ross. "Your move, Weissmann."

"Pawn to King's four," said Weissmann.

His strong, thick-knuckled hand—that of an artisan rather than an artist—advanced the pawn. Ross hesitated an instant, then pushed his King's pawn forward to meet it. The pieces of Weissmann's set were more than mere conventionalizations. The pawns were true foot-soldiers, just as the bishops were veritable ecclesiastics, mitered and gowned; the knights mounted horsemen, caparisoned for battle.

Springer persisted, "You say nothing we do can alter

what is, to be. Then you don't believe in free will?"

"That man is the master of his fate, the captain of his soul?" chuckled Weissmann. "I fear not, Rufus. With all deference to the poet, I cannot credit foolish, fumbling Man with the power of controlling his own destiny."

"But that's ridiculous!" protested Springer. "I *do* make my own decisions. I *do* think."

"Shades of poor Descartes!" sighed Weissmann. "He, too, had too much imagination. You must one day read his dissertations on vortices and automatism. They shame the wildest fantasies of Verne."

"My boy, the mere existence of a thought within your brain does not prove you master of that thought. Or of the actions resulting from it. As well to say these gallant warriors—" Weissmann nodded at the chessman arraigned before him—"control the fate which is their destined lot. Doubtless they also love and hate, know fear and anger and an urge to make their world a better one."

"Now you *are* talking nonsense!" snorted Springer. "Chessmen who think, indeed!"

"And why not? What proof exists that Man alone can reason? Speech? There are talking birds. Writing? Beasts of burden have been taught to spell."

"But birds and beasts have

life. Chessmen are bits of carved ivory."

"And who can say," parried Weissmann, "that bits of ivory may not think and talk, know life on a plane of existence incomprehensible to us? There are sounds we cannot hear, colors we cannot see. Can you not conceive of movement indiscernible to our eyes? Of speech inaudible to our senses? Of a mode of life so foreign to our own as to be a void in our awareness?"

"Frankly," said Springer, "no."

"Nor I!" laughed Ross. "Let's get on with the game, Weissmann."

"I can," persisted Weissmann imperturbably, "and do. I believe these chessmen *do* think. Just as I believe turnips scream in agony when they are pared and thrust into a boiling pot. As I believe flowers sing wild paeans to their god, the Sun. And that sluggish ores deep in the turgid caverns at Earth's heart dream slow, unfathomable, metallic dreams."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" jeered Springer. "Now who's got the surplus of imagination!"

The older man shrugged.

"You don't accept because there is no way to make you understand. Not unless I could force your awareness out of *this* world and into that of the chessmen—" He laughed softly, turning his deep, wise eyes upon Springer.

er, holding the younger man's gaze intently. "Were I a mesmerist who could say, '*Sleep! Sleep, and in your dreaming walk with these other worldlings—*'"

"I'd do it," chuckled Springer. "Partly to prove you're wrong, and mostly because I'm dead tired, anyway. You guys don't mind if I snatch forty winks while you play?"

And he yawned, closing his eyes—annoyingly aware even as he did so that it was a ruse to escape the curiously potent compulsion of Weissmann's gaze. A strange character, Weissmann. Smart as a whip, but whacky in some ways. Mysterious, too. "*Sleep, and in your dreaming walk with these other worldlings—*"

And those eyes of his. Strange how deep they were. Like wells? No...the author in Springer rejected the cliché. Like high cliffs straining to a midnight sky. You could fall away and upward from such heights...fall outward to the cold and distant stars, alone and giddy in the emptiness of space.

As from far away he heard Tom's faintly acid voice. "*We're finally going to play, eh? Well, good! Your move, Weissmann.*" The quilted whisper of a chessman in motion, and the older man's reply. "*Knight to King's Bishop three.*" Then Ross, his beethin mirth a dwindling ghost of laughter in the void. "So

that's the plan? Bringing up the cavalry, eh?"

Then the stars beckoned...

2.

"SO THAT'S the plan?" cried the Seneschal fiercely. "Bringing up the cavalry, eh? Bringing up the damned cavalry against our poor devils of foot soldiers!" He turned sharply from the battlement overlooking the plain and fastened irate eyes on his companion. "Well, sir?" he challenged. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing," said Sir Rufus easily. "Nothing at all. What would you have me do, old grumbler?"

"What would I have you do?" grated the old warrior. "Why, you smirking young whippersnapper, I'd have you ride to the relief of those unhappy villains...that's what I'd have you do! And that's what you *would* do, too, were you a man and not a perfumed popinjay!"

"Without orders?" parried the young knight.

"Orders!" Sir Roderick spat contemptuously. "Name of God, who needs orders at a time like this? Any fool knows what must be done. They've attacked us, haven't they?"

"And the King dispatched a regiment to stop them."

"Aye! And now those men are threatened by superior

forces. They must be protected."

Sir Rufus smiled lazily. "The trouble with you old timers is that you've never studied military tactics. Stop champing at the bit, old warhorse. The High Command knows best. There'll be action for all before this war is over."

"That there will," conceded the Seneschal gloomily. "Whole armies lost, and good men slain, and the plain burned bare with slaughter and destruction. Pox take them!" He exploded with sudden violence. "Will they never give us peace? Were ever a people plagued with neighbors so troublesome? Ten centuries of fruitless, bloody war... and still they attack. Ever *they* attack! Just once I'd like to see *our* armies seize the initiative, march against them and crush them into the muck from whence they sprang!"

Sir Rufus shook his head, his plumed casque waving feathery regret.

"That you will never see. We are a peaceful folk. We seek no trouble."

"Speak for yourself, coward!" blazed the older man. "I seek trouble. Give me the chance to meet them on the field of combat—"

"Coward, you said?" interrupted Sir Rufus softly. He slipped the knuckled gauntlet from his hand and creased it for the hurling. "Pardon, Sir

Seneschal, but did I hear your words aright?"

Sir Roderick flushed. "Sorry, my boy," he grumbled contritely. "My old tongue needs a curb. I swallow the word; the thought I never had. You are young—yes. But when the time comes, you will prove yourself."

"And am I not mistaken," said Sir Rufus, satisfied, "the time comes now. See? Her Ladyship's messenger—"

Spurning cloudlets of dust, a courier galloped into the courtyard. He spied the men atop the battlement and cupped his hands.

"Sir Rufus? A message from Her Majesty the Queen. Repair at once to the aid of the King's guardsmen. All haste!"

"I hear and acknowledge!" shouted Sir Rufus. "Tell Her Majesty we take saddle at once." He whirled to face Sir Roderick, eyes shining. "Well, old timer, this is it!"

"The old plan," said Sir Roderick with satisfaction, "and the best. God shield you, lad. And—give them hell!"

3.

HIS COMMAND consisted of two regiments: the mounted troop which he himself led, and an auxiliary force of pikemen captained by the Chevalier Rouget, an old cavalryman become too brittle of bone for mounted combat. Haste being of the essence,

Sir Rufus ordered his mounted troops to press on ahead of the slower moving foot soldiers. Having reached the assigned position, he gave orders that the men rest, horses be watered and fed. Then, with a cadet lieutenant, he went to the top of a nearby rise to survey the terrain.

The subaltern, a fresh-cheeked youngster from the provinces, was frankly delighted with his first taste of action. He bubbled with schemes for sallies and campaigns—plans which Sir Rufus, trained under the stern tutelage of the War College, found fantastic and amusing.

"Why tarry here, Milord?" he pleaded eagerly. "We are fresh and strong. Another swift foray will bear us over the border into enemy territory—and they without an active force to block our way."

"Except," Sir Rufus reminded him wryly, "the enemy King's cavalry. Are you, then, so anxious to die young?"

"They wouldn't dare attack us!" persisted the cadet lieutenant. "With the foot regiment moving up to defend our flank, we'll outnumber them two to one."

"And what is to prevent them," laughed Sir Rufus, "from attacking the foot regiment instead of us?"

"Oh!" said the youngster bleakly. "I hadn't thought of that." Then his face brightened again. "But suppose they

do turn against the border guard? I've heard you say yourself, Milord, that in a war of maneuver, men are expendable. We stand in position to thrust deep into the enemy's stronghold, before the Queen's cathedral. Let her stir a step and we lay siege at once to her bastion and to the King's own palace!"

Sir Rufus listened politely. He had no intention of shattering the youth's ardor with a gibe, a criticism. The lad was, at least, a thinker. From such as he were forged great leaders. Who could say but that from such wild dreaming might not one day come that which military strategists had been seeking for over ten centuries: the Perfect Campaign, the ideal counter-offensive which would lead inerrably to triumph? Still to this plan there was one obvious fault.

"The idea has merit," he acknowledged. "Indeed, it has been tried in other wars—though without success. But you forget one thing."

"Yes, Milord?"

"We may not press on immediately. Might not even if we willed. We must wait now to see what the enemy does."

The boy stared at him in bewilderment.

"And lose the initiative. But, Milord, now is the time to strike! Now, while they are unsettled and uncertain. Why wait for them to act? That moment is precious."

"It is the Rules of War,"

shrugged Sir Rufus. "We must wait. To do otherwise would be unseemly."

"Rules of War! 'Swounds, Milord, war is no pastime played with bits on a wagering board! The single rule of war is to win, by whatever means available."

"Lieutenant!" Sir Rufus smiled tolerantly. "May I remind you we are knights and nobles met in honorable combat, not draymen brawling in a public house? It is a harsh game, certes, and a bloody one. But we play it by the rules."

The youngster's face was sullen. "Rules, pardee! Are we men, thinking for ourselves or puppets being dangled on the worn strings of tradition? Chivalry and gallantry are all very well, Milord, for noblemen. But how about the foot soldiers? Does it rest them easier in their graves to know they died in honorable combat? Does it sooth the aching of their widows' hearts to know the rules of war were well observed? You forget, Milord, that these little people also love and hate, know fear and anger and an urge to make their world a better one!"

"And you forget, Lieutenant," snapped Sir Rufus, "that you are talking to—" He stopped abruptly, a dazed look in his eyes—"What was that? What did you say?"

"I'm sorry, Milord. Perhaps too much."

"No, it's all right," said Sir Rufus, groping. "There is something in what you say. But the words. . . *'Fear and anger and an urge to make their world a better one.'* I seem to have heard them before. Elsewhere far away and long ago. But I cannot remember—"

He passed a gloved hand across his eyes, shaken by an emotion defying name or explanation. *Something*, he thought. *Or someone. A cone of yellow light in a vast, booklined room, and men like gods. A high hill yearning to the midnight sky, and the mocking thunder of celestial mirth. . .*

"You are all right, Milord?" asked the young cadet anxiously. "You are not unwell?"

Sir Rufus shook his head, with an effort clearing his brain of the inexplicable maggot.

"Yes, quite all right, thank you. A mood. . . a fleeting fancy. It does not matter."

"Shall we return to camp, Milord?"

"Good idea. There is much to— Stay!"

Sir Rufus hissed the final word, clutching the young man's arm, dragging him groundward beside him. The lad winced at the pressure but uttered not a sound. His eyes, following the gaze of Sir Rufus, widened at what they saw.

"Soldiers, Milord!" he whispered. "Enemy soldiers!"

"The Blanchard King's Crusaders," breathed Sir Ruf-

us, identifying the approaching pennon. "Soldiers of the Church. But what are *they* doing out here at the border?"

"Milord," warned the lieutenant. "Behind us! Riding up from our lines—"

"The Queen's troops?"

"Nay, Milord. *More* Church warriors. And I think—nay, I *know*—they are His Majesty's priests. For, see, there rides his Bishop at the van!" The lieutenant's voice was hot with excitement. "This means a battle, Milord. They're certain to make contact at the border. Shall I haste back and sound the warning?"

4.

"NO, WAIT!" bade Sir Rufus, tensing his grip on the cadet's arm. "Wait and watch. There is something here I do not understand. For, see—" A baffled and incredulous anger thickened his voice "they have met. And by the Saints, they meet in peace! They smile... greet each other like brothers. What devil's parley is this?"

The cadet said, "But the King's own confessor, Milord? Surly *he* would not conspire with the enemy in time of war?"

"Would he not? I don't trust him. I've never trusted him. Or his cunning kinsman, crouching slyly at Her Majesty's side, prating soft

words of piety and peace, standing between the throne and the fighting men who would defend it."

"Peace?" echoed the other man hopefully. "Perhaps this is a parley? With the Churchmen serving as intermediary?"

"Possible," conceded Sir Rufus, "but unlikely. You don't know them as I do, lad. Strange creatures are these churchmen. They think and act obliquely, slanting off on tangents of their own. But stay—what do they now?"

For a stir had passed through the group assembled at the border. Brocaded pennons fluttered, the glinting beaks of lowered halberds tilted suddenly aloft, the strident warning of a bugle shattered the silence of the plain. There was a bristling separation of the two forces, and that of His Majesty whirled abruptly to face the enemy's domain.

"Blanchard reinforcements!" cried the lieutenant. "A-second army races to outflank them!"

"So that's it!" roared Sir Rufus. "Then it wasn't our churchmen who were guilty of treachery, but theirs! They violate a peace parley with a sneak attack? Come, lad!"

He sprang swiftly to his feet, started back toward camp. The cadet, racing beside him, panted, "What do we do, Milord? Haste to the King and warn him?"

"We do not! We ride forward. As soon as we take horse we ride to destroy their furtive rabble. If it be war they want, then they shall have it!"

Now, behind them, rose the din of battle joined. Cries, and the clash of armor, the thud of mace and groan of denting shield. Sir Rufus bel-lowed furiously, "The fools! Why didn't they wait for us? This was *our* task."

The cadet ventured hope-fully, "They seem to be do-ing well, Milord. They are pressing the enemy back."

"And if they do," growled the knight, "what gain? They should have let us meet the interlopers. We are mounted. We have the greater mobility. The High Command shall hear of this, pardee! A Church army crossing the bor-der without one sign of plan, joining battle without orders ... is it any wonder we lose wars?"

"But they're not losing, Milord, they're winning!" The cry ripped from the lieuten-ant's throat. "See, they have won! The varlets turn and flee. The field is ours. First victory for us!"

Sir Rufus slowed to a walk. No need to call his troops to horse. The careful strategy of the War College was undone, upset by the impetuous foray of a force that never should have taken the field. The Churchmen had won a battle, true. But...

"First blood," he conceded grudgingly. "And first vic-tory. But who will win the last? That is what counts, Lieutenant. Who will win the last?"

5.

THE ENCAMPED troops had heard the din of conflict, and like the action-hungry dogs of war they were had sent out scouts to learn what was going on. This was a minor breach of regulations for which Sir Rufus had not the heart to order punishment, knowing it was not mere curi-osity that impelled them, but eagerness to be a part of any fighting within bow's reach.

There was disappointment when he told them of the ec-clesiastics' clash with the flanking column, and that there would be no advance for the present. One of the squadron leaders suggested a deployment to the frontier, covering the Church army's flank, but Sir Rufus vetoed the suggestion on two counts. First, because no such orders had emanated from headquar-ters. Second, and more cogily, because he was not yet con-vinced the Crusaders could maintain firm footing in their newly-won terrain.

The soundness of this rea-soning was soon proven. The scouts, returning, verified his fears. No sooner had the King's churchmen pitched camp than the enemy hurled

a new column against them. Infantry battalions of the Blanchard Queen's Cross thrust forward to attack the freshly gained position. The Crusaders had scant choice of action. Either must they retreat homeward, or they must fall back to the border. The second was their chosen plan of action, much to the disdain of Sir Rufus.

"Had the idiots fallen back to support the King's infantry," he complained to his subalterns, "they would have freed us for action. As it is—"

He shrugged helplessly, and his battlewise warriors, scanning the field maps, saw what he meant. Far from being a mobile, roving force that could strike terror into the foe, they were become part of the tactical reserve, hemmed in on every side, unable to make a forward move, compelled to cover the flanks of two over-extended advance units.

Even so, Sir Rufus yet could smile. It was a sorry enough war he was being forced to fight. But he was willing to wager that his impatience was a pallid fury compared to that of old Sir Roderick, chained to his tower, hopelessly distant from either sight or sound of action.

6.

ONCE IN the night he woke, bemused and puzzled.

Out of the depths of dreamless slumber came to him a voice, as from far away, but crystal clear, a voice that said, "*Rufus? Oh, Rufus?*" Then another voice, more quietly, "*He's sleeping, I believe. Let him rest.*"

That, and no more. But the spectral conversation roused him from his pallet with a start, brought him bolt upright with cold sweat in his palms and a strange tingling of the small hairs at his nape.

"Who calls me?" he demanded. But there was no answer. Outside the tent a sentry paced his lonely watch. Far to the east a cock crowed strident welcome to the dunlaced blue of dawn, and from a nearby copse rang the clean bite of an axe as a scullery serf hacked fuel for the breakfast fire.

After a moment, Sir Rufus sank back to his cot. But he did not sleep again. He lay there listening to the sounds of a rousing camp: the clank of metal, the hawk and spit of drowsy male animals reluctantly dragging themselves from the certain warmth of blankets to the possible cold of death before another nightfall, the conversations that began as muted whisperings and gathered to coarse cries and louder laughter as the moments passed. The nickering of horses, the crunch of post sentries, returned with leather boots on gravel, the bluster and complaint of out-

dawn to chafe blue wrists before the welcome fire. The good, familiar sounds of a wakening camp.

These things he heard and understood and loved, being one and a part of them. But this other thing? These occult voices whispering in the night. "*Rufus?*" Since his father's death a decade since, no man had called him by his Christian name. And that reply, "*He's sleeping, I believe.*" Who believed? And why should there be doubt that he was sleeping?

There were those who claimed superstition was ignorance. But there were others, just as wise, who said superstitions were based on facts little comprehended but still true. And it was an antique superstition of the knighthood that when a man's time was upon him, when little longer would he walk the Plain, there came to him visions. Visions, and sometimes voices.

Well, then?—Sir Rufus shrugged aside his covers—if he had an appointment with Destiny, there was no sense in dawdling here abed. No terror lay beyond the gates of death for a brave man; that he knew. Death was but a sleep and an awakening to tourneys ever joyous and triumphant.

Still... those voices? Voices unknown, yet frighteningly familiar. *A haze of fragrant smoke and a tinkling glass.*

Grave, kindly eyes, and the brow of a windtorn hill.

Rouget came from base camp to report on the night's events. He knew war, did Rouget. On this same plain, for more years than he cared to acknowledge, he had battled this same enemy. None knew the game of war better than this battleworn Chevalier.

He said abruptly, "Well, we're in for it now!"

"They moved during the night?" asked Sir Rufus.

Rouget nodded. "A fresh division. Forced march from the Queen's armory to the frontier. There were skirmishes between their men and the King's foot all night."

Sir Rufus studied the revised field maps, bit his lip thoughtfully. "You know what this means, of course."

"It could mean many things, Milord. The decision rests with the High Command. The King's Foot can attack them. Or we can. Or we can bring up our reserves. Or, best of all, the Crusaders can attack their line of supply. If—" His eyes reflected his doubt—"they have the courage."

"I think they have," said Sir Rufus thoughtfully. "I like Churchmen no more than you do, Chevalier. But I saw them fight yesterday, and this I will say for them: they don't know the meaning of fear. But—"

"But, Milord?"

"I doubt His Majesty will let them sacrifice themselves. He leans too much on the Bishop for guidance. He will not risk him. No, it will be the foot regiment, I'm sure."

"And then," said Rouget quietly, "their cavalry will come up. And we'll be in it by noon. I'll tell the men."

He started for the door of the tent, but fell back as the flaps parted suddenly, admitting Sir Rufus' lieutenant. The young cadet was vibrant with excitement.

"Have you heard the news, Milord? Great news!"

"Well?" cried Sir Rufus. "Well? We advance?"

"No need to advance, Milord! The King's Fusileers attacked the enemy at dawn—"

"As we guessed!" Sir Rufus tossed Rouget a swift, triumphant glance. "And then—?"

"You'll never guess what happened, Milord. Never!"

"They counter-attacked, of course."

"Nay, Milord. They did not. The miserable cowards fled. Their panic stricken King has left the capital and raced to the protection of his castle in the provinces!" The youngster laughed triumphantly. "The war is almost over, Milord—and we have won!"

7.

FOR A LONG moment Sir Rufus stared at the lad in-

credulously. Then: "Fled?" he choked eventually. "Their King fled? Incredible!"

"But true, Milord. He is gone, leaving the field to us."

The Chevalier Rouget groaned, twisting a balled fist in a cupped palm. "And we hemmed in, unable to stir a step! A murrain on those incense-swinging psalmists!"

"Even yet," blazed Sir Rufus, "they can atone. If they will attack the Blanchard supply line *now*, we'll cross the border behind them." His swift brain raced with the possibilities opened by the enemy's retreat. "Their cavalry must come out to defend the Queen's fortress. When it does, our infantry can slash them to ribbons!"

"Then Her Ladyship's reserve can come up," boomed Rouget, "and their whole frontier is broken."

"Come!" said Sir Rufus. "Let us see if I judged correctly. Let us learn if churchmen have courage or no."

He led the way from the tent. The three hurried to the watchtower flung up during the night and looked off across the dawn-hazed countryside to the neighboring camp of the Crusaders. It was a pleasant terrain, a land more suited to the soft pursuits of peace than to the bloody hazard of war. A fertile farmland, chequered with precise areas of crop and pastureland. Between the rows coursed tiny, purling brooks, and be-

yond the second of these natural barriers lay the camp of the King's churchmen.

There was a tense excitement in that camp, discernible even from this distance. Tents were being struck, pack animals hurriedly laden. Sir Rufus nodded, satisfied.

"Blow the assembly," he bade Rouget. "Bid the men strike camp. We move within the hour."

"Milord—" cried the cadet lieutenant.

"Later, Lieutenant!" snapped Sir Rufus. "Rouget, when you return to camp, send a message to the Queen. Bid her dispatch an advance guard—"

"Pardon, Milord," interrupted the lieutenant stridently, "but it is too late. Look! Across the border. The King's infantry—"

Sir Rufus turned, stared... then started violently. His voice cracked on his cry. "The fools! The everlasting damned fools! They'll destroy us all!"

Rouget asked fearfully, "What is it, Milord? These weary old eyes of mine... I can't see as I used to."

"They're mad as hares," moaned Sir Rufus, "or drunk with victory! Without reserve or supplies, the idiots have pressed forward straight into the heart of the enemy's stronghold!"

8

THERE WAS no doubt in the mind of Sir Rufus as to

the enemy's next move. Clearly the Fusileers had dared too much and would suffer the consequence. True, the enemy King had fled. But his vixen consort—"The good Queen Blanche," thought Sir Rufus derisively, recalling the host of scandals evolving around the Amazon regent's name—had flying columns within easy march of the attackers. A swift foray...

Sir Rufus shrugged helplessly. Another Lost Battalion to have its name inscribed on the palace plaques with innumerable others. And there was nothing he could do about it. Absolutely nothing. Nor at this late hour could the High Command dispatch relief to the over-aggressive footmen of the King.

So he chafed for a morning and a forenoon, waiting for the inevitable report of the advance guard's destruction. But when at weary last came word of the action going on, it was news of a startling nature. A messenger rode up from base headquarters. His face was wreathed in smiles. "How now, Sir Rufus? Ready for the fray?" was his greeting.

Sir Rufus said impatiently, "Fret not for us. We move at an instant's notice. How goes it with the battle?"

"Well," said the messenger complacently. "The enemy, methinks, has lost his cunning. This is one war he'll rue his brain's contriving."

"Aye," said Sir Rufus gloomily, "so we hope. But an army has been lost that never should have moved. The King's First Foot... did any escape the massacre?"

"Massacre, Milord?"

"You mean," demanded Sir Rufus, "the King's First Foot has not yet been attacked?"

"Not yet," chuckled the rider, "nor does the enemy seem to relish the prospect. The Queen refused battle. Instead, she deserted her palace and rode to her Bishop's camp."

"She *what!*" gasped Sir Rufus. "Show me!" Before the messenger he spread a campaign map. The rider pointed out the new positions of the enemy. Sir Rufus studied. And then: "There is more here," he said, "than meets the eye. I know their Queen, as ours, leans strongly on her Church advisors. But she did not seek them merely for conference. See, now, how their forces converge. Methinks she plans to thrust straightway to our capital."

The messenger grinned. "So thought *our* Queen, and moved her Elite Guard. Even now they stand before the West Gate. There'll be no attack. Sir Rufus, in *that* sector."

the Queen's guard. If they advance, flanked by cavalry—"

There was respect in the messenger's eyes, respect infrequently accorded a field leader by one of the Intelligence corps.

"You have a nice eye for strategy, Sir Rufus," he conceded. "That is exactly what has already happened. Their infantry *did* come up. But—" He shrugged—"it was a gesture of no importance. Her Ladyship moved her forces to a previously prepared position a few miles away, a spot unsailable by any mere infantry detachment."

"And," he hinted broadly, "I might add that this move, also, was in accordance with plan. I am not permitted to say more... now. But since you're such a tactician—"

There he let the matter drop. Nor could further prodding by Sir Rufus draw another word from him. He left a while later, bearing with him Sir Rufus' formal request that the cavalry troop be permitted to attack the enemy advance guard. But even as he penned the request, Sir Rufus knew he was wasting his time. The High Command did not hearken to suggestions from the fighters on the field...

9.

10.

11.

12.

"BUT THE enemy King's infantry," frowned Sir Rufus, "stands within short march of

SO PASSED another weary afternoon, an evening, and a night. Which was, chafed Sir Rufus, the trouble with war.

Things took so long to develop. If you could only pursue a plan while it was hot in your brain— But, no! the rules of war must be observed. And even if the enemy chose to dawdle and delay, there was nought to be done but wait, and wait some more.

It annoyed him to find himself reflecting the cadet lieutenant's thoughts. But Sir Rufus was a reasonable man. And there was, he conceded, much merit to the youth's complaining. The rules of war were a stifling inhibition to ingenuity. Sometimes a man felt as if he had no—

Free will? Once again, as yesterday, the casual employment of a phrase roused a strange reaction in his mind. It seemed to him that once, elsewhere, he had argued on that score. Someone, somewhere, had denied the existence of free will. *Deep leather chairs, and a box of carven pieces.* But that was madness. Certes, a man had free will... though of course there were commands to be obeyed, rules which must be followed.

During the night, the guardsmen of the provincial castle to which the enemy king had fled crept from their bastion to see what threat portended. But also in the darkness His Majesty's cavalry rode from their quarters to the King's court, clearing the way for the King to seek refuge should it finally become needful.

With dawn came news of further parley at the enemy Queen's camp. Her church army slipped forward to join the conference begun yesterday. What devil's broth was brewing Sir Rufus could not guess. But he did not now, nor had he ever, completely trusted churchmen. He sent for Rouget.

"You have courage, old friend," he said bluntly. "That has oft been proven. But have you also daring?"

Rouget asked simply, "What would you have me do, Milord?"

"The wind blows from the north," said Sir Rufus, "and I care not for its smell. My troops are frozen here, apparently forever... unless the stupid dolts at headquarters change their plan. We need information as to what Queen Blanche and her bishops conspire. Will you take your footmen forward to the border and observe them?"

"Is this a suggestion, Milord, or a command?"

"A suggestion only," admitted Sir Rufus. "And a mission fraught with peril."

The Chevalier said, "I am an old man, Milord, and a weary one. Life and death are one to me. We will advance."

At noon the Chevalier led his men past the encampment of their mounted allies. Then passed hours of brooding silence during which Sir Rufus,

tent-bound, sat and gnawed his lips.

What he had done, he knew, was in violation of all regulations. The infantry was his to command, but only in accordance with orders emanating from headquarters. He had dared greatly in bidding Rouget advance his troops. If the plan succeeded there would be glory for all, possibly an Earldom for himself. But if it failed...

It failed. Late in the afternoon the slumbering pain shook to the thunder of battle. For hours the tumult raged. Sir Rufus paced the watchtower nervously, unable to tell from that great distance which side held the advantage. At evenfall he learned. A few stragglers, bloody and in rags, sifted back to camp as the sounds of conflict died. One stood before Sir Rufus wretchedly.

"We did our best, Milord. But we were outmanned ten to one. We were no match for the Queen's guard."

"How many escaped?" asked Sir Rufus.

"A score, perhaps, Milord. No more."

"The Chevalier Rouget?"

"He fought well," said the soldier simply. "The enemy dead lay in windrows about him."

"Very well," said Sir Rufus. "You may go." With a face like a carven mask he returned the man's salute and watched him a way. But a mo-

ment later, in the privacy of his tent, there were tears in his eyes. Tears of fury and despair at his own tremendous folly. And of regret for a gallant comrade lost forever.

How long he might have lingered there, berating himself and mourning Rouget, it is impossible to guess. He was roused from his brooding by a hoarse bellow in a familiar voice. "Rufus! Sir Rufus, there, young gamecock! What's going on? What's all this hellish pothering about?"

Sir Rufus sprang to the tent flaps. Stomping from his bastion at the head of his troops was Sir Roderick, red-faced and querulous, armed to the teeth and spoiling for a fight. He spied the younger man and shouted fretfully, "They tell me you lost your reserve. Is it true?"

Sir Rufus nodded glumly. "It is. I had a plan—"

"You had a plan! You mean you moved them without orders?"

"It was a good plan—" began the knight.

"Aye, maybe so. But they draw and quarter men for trying good plans that fail. What's to be done now?"

Sir Rufus said, "Nothing, I fear. You'd best get back to the castle. Even now their Queen advances on us—"

"Their Queen, is it?" belowered Roderick. "Now, that I like! The quarrelsome, brawling wench. Let her show her

face to me and I'll teach her a thing or two. Eh, lad?"

A spark of hope rekindled in Sir Rufus' despondent heart. Perhaps, he thought, the day might yet be saved. If he and Roderick joined forces...

"I'll back you up!" he cried.

"Good! Then we'll have at her!" roared the knight Senechal. "Ho, messenger! A warning to that vixen scut who dares cross our frontier. Tell her an invitation to the battle waits... and we'll have her ears for breakfast!"

13. 14. 15. 16.

BUT IT WAS no breakfast of queenly ears for Roderick that morning. After a cold night's waiting for reply to his challenge came with the dawn scouts from the outpost bearing news that under cover of night Queen Blanche had withdrawn her forces, retreating out of battle range to the safety of her own border.

Sir Roderick was furious. "A gallant bawd, indeed! Ventures forth to do battle with serfs...but when a noble shakes his banner, she lifts her easy skirts and vanishes like a doe. Fie on the round-heeled wench!"

"And what is *this*?" he continued. "Who comes now to bar me from pursuing the pale-faced drab to her scented bedchamber?"

For blocked indeed he was from further action...because

trooping back from the border came the Queen's Crusaders. To the site just across the river from Sir Rufus' camp they marched, and there halted. Sir Rufus frowned.

"I don't know what they're up to now," he said, "but I'll go find out. Hold tight, Sir Roderick."

In person he visited the churchmen's camp. His Grace the Bishop met him wreathed in smiles, soothing away all questions with deft movements of his soft, bejewelled hands.

"There, now, Sir Knight," he chided, "lose not in haste your wits. Retreat? Of course not. The Church defends the throne to the last man. We have but effected a strategic withdrawal to plan our new campaign."

"And what," demanded Rufus, "was the matter with the old one? If Your Grace had but attacked the enemy day before yesterday, we would not now be in this sorry plight."

"Those are harsh words," purred the Bishop dangerously, "for one whose reckless actions have already resulted in the loss of an entire regiment. Or perhaps the High Command ordered... No? Too bad. But if I can count on your support *now*, I might be able to return the favor if there should be—as of course we hope there will not—a court martial?"

Sir Rufus answered stiffly,

"Your Grace cannot buy my connivance to private schemes. You realize, of course, that you waste time here? That the enemy's cavalry reserve has already started for the front?"

"We have heard some such rumor," smiled the Bishop languidly. "But we are not afraid. We are expecting our brother, the King's advisor, here for conference within the hour. *Private* conference. So if you will pardon me—?"

"Very well," grated Sir Rufus. "I shall go, Your Holiness. But mark you well—if there be from you or your psalter-smiting brother one false move—"

"Peace be upon you, my son," smiled the Bishop through clenched teeth. "Sergeant, his Lordship's horse."

So Sir Rufus left, even as the army of the other ecclesiastic moved in to hold converse with the first.

Meanwhile, Intelligence reported that the Blanchard cavalry reserve was on the move. Protected by the Home Guard, they had now advanced all the way to the border. What action this portended, Sir Rufus could not guess. But one thing was clear. With each passing hour the advance post held by the enemy's first infantry division—that which had crossed the border days ago—loomed more threatening. At all costs, this division must be isolated. His troops

were in position to strike and strike hard. If Her Ladyship would back him up, Sir Rufus was eager to essay the task.

As if reading his desire, the Queen's regiment *did* move. And coincident with its advance came a message from headquarters:

From: Base Headquarters
To: Commander, His Majesty's First Cavalry

Sir Captain:

Her Majesty's Elite Guard has moved to the border in direct support of a campaign to suppress the invasion forces. Prepare to attack upon receipt of this order as prearranged by Defense Plan D. Long live the King!

(signed) Thomas
Viscount Ross
Commander-in-Chief

It was a message which brought a thrill of pleasure to Sir Rufus. For more than one reason. First, it promised action to come. Second, by omission of any reference, it indicated that the High Command had decided—for the present, at least—to take no official cognizance of his recent impetuous action.

Perhaps the War Department had even found some way to make use of the tactical position his blunder had

brought about. In that case, there might never be a court martial. Indeed, if the war were won—when the war was won, Sir Rufus corrected himself sharply—there might be a citation for “action in the field resulting in victory.” Pleasant thought.

But this new Commander-in-Chief... Viscount Ross? His name was unfamiliar to Sir Rufus. Or... was it? Ross? Sir Rufus frowned. He had a vague recollection... someone he had met somewhere. But where? At court, perhaps?

A fretful face. Fingers drumming nervously on wood, and a mind that worked on impulse. A man victim to his own intuition... and the click of statuettes on a patterned board...

Sir Rufus shrugged. He knew no Viscount Ross.

Word came that the King's First Foot had finally been taken. Returning home from conference with their Queen, the enemy Crusaders had stumbled upon the camp of the Lost Battalion. The regiment had long been cut off from its line of supply; the men were gaunt with hunger, weak with despair. The result of the ensuing battle was a foregone conclusion.

Sir Rufus sighed to hear the news, but did not mourn. In war, men were expendable. And even in destruction the advance guard had given their fellow countrymen assistance.

For by the rules of war, the Crusaders' conquest constituted an aggressive action, which meant the next move was that of the defenders. Sir Rufus bade his men strike camp and arm for battle, expecting momentarily an order to attack. The enemy also had an advance guard, a Lost Battalion of its own. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth... a regiment for a regiment...

But the expected orders did not come. Instead, inexplicably, came a report from the scouts that in a sudden reversal of tactics the Queen's Elite, led by Her Ladyship herself, had whirled and raced along the border to a position opposite the enemy King's hide-away in the provinces!

Sir Rufus stood appalled at hearing this. He saw no reason for such headlong flight. It was insane, wastrel, mad! Or so, embittered by his disappointment, thought the knight. He was wrong. He was soon to learn the reason.

17. 18. 19. 20.

SIR RUFUS had established a communication with his good friend, comrade in arms, and erstwhile classmate in the War College, Ippolytus Lord Quaestor, Knight Commander of His Majesty's Royal Cavalry. With other horsemen Sir Rufus felt more kinship than with any of his other associates... even than with old Sir Roderick who, like

himself, was pledged to Her Ladyship's service. They thought and fought alike, he and good old Pol. And when the going was rough, there was nothing like mounted support to help one out of a fix.

It was from Sir Ippolytus he received direct news of the action coalescing on the western front. Pol sent his first alarm shortly before dawn. "Stand by," he warned, "*for instant action. Enemy cavalry moving deeper into our territory. Expect flanking attack against Queen's Guard.*"

Even before Sir Rufus could acknowledge receipt of the warning, a second message followed. The squire bearing it was jubilant.

"They *did* attack, Sir Rufus," he explained, "even as Milord Ippolytus expected. But we repulsed them...cut them to ribbons. The threat is ended."

"Good!" said Sir Rufus. "And your infantry? They escaped unscathed?"

"Not quite, sir. In fact, they lost so many men that they are ineffective as a fighting force until they can be reconstituted. The enemy King's patrols advanced to rout our men from terrain briefly held, but—"

Sir Rufus exclaimed, "Then, idiot, Sir Ippolytus' camp is threatened? You told me all is well."

"And so it is, Milord," said the courier patiently. "The

enemy attack has bogged down at our line of inner defense. And His Majesty's Home Guard has moved into position to support Her Ladyship's campaign."

"Her Ladyship's campaign?" repeated Sir Rufus wonderingly. He strode to the field maps and studied them. A dawning admiration gathered in his eyes. "Now, by the Sign, you are right! Our High Command is not the band of idiots I feared. A swift attack upon the enemy's cavalry, followed by destruction of their foot reserve, and their King will be trapped in his refuge!"

"Even so, Milord. Thus said Sir Ippolytus. Think you the war may end soon? A knight's rank," said the squire, "has been promised me with victory."

"Then," answered Sir Rufus, "I shall soon be calling you *Sir Whatever-your-name-may-be*. For unless the Blanchards move and move swiftly, the victory is ours. Any word as to their latest troop disposition?"

"Only that they are massing Home Guardsmen behind the lines. It is reported that their Queen's Seneschal has joined forces with the King's at the Queen's deserted palace."

Sir Rufus laughed. "*That* will not save them," he jeered. "The dolts gather strength where it is valueless. Return to your Lord Commander and tell him his friend Rufus

stands to his support. Tell him also that we shall meet at the victory table to toast our earned success in this cam—Stay! What is that?"

For there came to his ears from outside the tent a sound of many voices. Triumphant voices lifting in mad clamor. Before he could reach the tent flaps, canvas parted, and his cadet lieutenant entered.

"Milord! Great news!"

"Yes, lad? What is it?"

"A victory surely won. Her Majesty's troops—"

"Have marched?"

"Have sped like the wind, Milord, in surprise attack. The cavalry guarding their King's hideout has been hacked to bits...and the Blanchard King lies helpless in his castle!"

Later, looking back upon the series of disastrous blows that struck with such sudden triphammer force, Sir Rufus was to wonder why at that moment he had been so blind, so blissfully confident of victory. When in those later hours scant breathing spells permitted him to review the whirling eddy of events, too late he realized that the enemy had taken into calculation even their foe's aggressive moves.

But at the time, it did not seem that way. For a brief, happy while Sir Rufus thought panic had engulfed the Blanchard command. Only

thus could he account for the recklessness with which they started hurling men, whole troops and regiments, into what seemed a futile cause. In this hour when sanity would seem to dictate stern conservation of every available force, the enemy went berserk with an apparent lust for self-destruction. There came in the heat of noon a warning from Sir Ippolytus' camp.

"Sir Rufus, be on guard! Their Home Guard moves. They've crossed the border, are breaching my position!"

Sir Rufus sounded his men to horse instantly. The road was long and tortuous; he could not see what was going on ahead until he rounded the moat before His Majesty's palace. Then he discovered he had started not a moment too soon. Old Pol had not cried wolf; the enemy was attacking in force. Even as Rufus spurred his troops to greater speed the guidon fell from the hands of the last defiant knight in Ippolytus' command, and footmen from the Blanchard ranks began to storm the castle walls.

Like a whirlwind Rufus' horsemen struck from behind. The fray was brief but bloody. Men struck and struck again, cast shattered arms aside to ride full tilt into the crimson pikes of the interlopers. Sir Rufus hurled the bulk of his troops against the ring of foe-man warriors girdling the palace grounds. With a picked

handfull he dismounted and pursued their leaders into the very corridors of the palace. There in hand to hand combat they met and picked them off one by one—until at last the great stone walls echoed only to the panting sobs of men worn with combat, and the enemy invaders grinned in frozen death from the moat into which their bodies had been hurled.

Sir Rufus sought the regent in his quarters. The King was grateful for the battle won, but he was fretful, too.

"What now, Sir Knight," he demanded petulantly. "Is this the victory my Lord Commanders promised? Where is Her Ladyship, and what of the Plan they said she had?"

"The plan goes well, Sire," Rufus reassured him. "Her Majesty stands at the very gates of the enemy retreat. As for this attack of theirs... it is the last defiance of a dying cause. They will try no more such futile forays."

The King, who had stalked to one of the windows, spun on him savagely, caustically.

"You're certain of that, Sir Knight?"

"As sure," said Rufus, "as of my name and honor."

"Then look to your honor," snarled the ruler, "and question your paternity. For *still* they attack, and in force! If I mistake me not, here come the troops of their vixen Queen herself!"

21. 22. 23.

IN A STRIDE Sir Rufus was at his ruler's side. A gasp escaped his lips. Fresh, strong, vigorous, the troops of the Blanchard Queen were pouring across the palace court in a silver flood. The regiment of guards at the postern gate delayed them scarce an instant; with pike and bow and spear they ripped the defenders to shreds. Into the palace grounds rode the hordes, and at their head rode the Amazon Queen Blanche.

Sir Rufus cried hoarsely, "Your Majesty—go! My troops are worn, exhausted. Even could I rally them, they could not set up a new defense line. Fly while there yet is time."

"Fly?" repeated His Majesty sternly. "And where is there to go, Sir Knight? Nay, Milord. I will show both you and they how a true King dies. Guard! To me, guard!"

So he strode forth... to his foredestined doom.

All through the night the dreadful battle raged. How it went, Sir Rufus could not tell. From his own weary troops he dispatched every man able to bear arms, realizing as he did so that he risked swift destruction from behind should the Blanchard infantry detachment on his flank decide to attack. But when kingdom

tremble in the balance, there is small choice of action.

And then, with dawning, came the battle's end. A courier came crying, "Gird all! Gird all and rally to His Majesty the King!"

Sir Rufus clutched the bridle of the rider's steed, dragging him to a halt.

"How now?" he demanded. "What of the battle? Is it won or lost?"

"Both won *and* lost, Milord," replied the crier.

"Talk sense, varlet! Queen Blanche—?"

"Dead, Milord. Stricken in mortal combat by His Majesty himself."

"The worms feast poorly!" growled Sir Rufus. "But if she be slain, why this tocsin of alarm? If we have met and killed their leader—"

"Because, Milord, still the damned Blanchards attack in ever increasing numbers. Their King's Crusaders have crossed the border. Not only that, but their dead Queen's Home Guard stands revealed in position to capture His Majesty if he does not flee at once."

Then his words were drowned in the thunder of hooves, and His Majesty's battered troops were pouring back into the court.

"Sir Rufus!" cried the King. "To me, Sir Rufus!"

"Aye, Sire?"

"I go to my palace. It is the last refuge. Do what you can

to hold them. I have sent a messenger to Her Ladyship, begging instant aid."

"It shall be as you say, Sire," said Sir Rufus, and called his men to ranks.

But the foe had tasted blood, and there was no withstanding them now. Scarce had the King entered the palace than over the northern hilltops rose the cross-crowned emblem of the enemy Crusaders. With cries of challenge they hurled themselves across the plain, charging into the court by the very gate through which His Majesty had lately entered. The hooves of their plunging horses stirred crimson dust where moments before their own Queen's blood had been shed.

And they were strange ecclesiastics, these. There was little of the piety and mercy which they prated from their pulpits in this advance. For all their cross and candle, they were more like demons than priests as they thundered into the postern court screaming like madmen.

"Yield!" was their cry. "Yield or die!"

Sir Rufus held his men in readiness for orders. There was nothing he could do now but wait for the attack. Wait and hope the High Command could find some way out of this debacle.

What that way might be, he could not see. Far to the north, Her Ladyship was impotent to aid. His own troops

were no match for those arrayed against them. And the King—no help might be expected from that quarter. For in his palace, the King, in utter panic, fled futilely from wing to threatened wing seeking a non-existent refuge.

24.

IT WAS IN the West Wing that His Majesty finally elected to make his last stand. That was the best hope...if best there was in hopeless situation...for at least there he had before him the knights of Sir Rufus' cavalry. And thus it was decided.

Sir Rufus told his men, "Their plan lies clear. That cursed regiment of foot—the regiment we should have finished long ago—lies on our flank. Undoubtedly they will attack. But we are stronger than they. If we fight well, there is still hope."

But it was not the infantry which, at the end, closed in for the kill. It was a force which Sir Rufus had ever distrusted, ever feared. Queen Blanche's churchmen, racing from their camp behind the border to avenge the death of their lady. It was they who smashed down upon the weary cavalymen with all the strength and vigor of reserves well fed and rested.

There was no time for thought in that final conflict. Still in stark moments shreds of thought coursed through

Sir Rufus' brain. As in a dream, he saw this war in its entirety; saw now and granted hatred-filled respect to the master plan of his foeman; saw, too, and loathed the treachery of those who had betrayed his liege lord's cause.

Those skulking churchmen. It was *they* whose machinations had brought disaster. They who from the first had conspired with the enemy to effect defeat. They who had refused to join battle earlier, when the contest teetered in the balance. They who had blocked Sir Roderick's eager troops from the fray when the weight of his armor might have tipped the balance from defeat to victory.

And now it was they who huddled in interminable "conference" far on the eastern front, conserving two strong armies which, brought up in time, might have saved the day.

The Bishops, ever the Bishops! Soft-handed, lying rascals unworthy of the trust their rulers had reposed in them. Even as Sir Rufus fought, his right arm dragging with the weight of his slashing sword, there rose to his lips a last snarl of hatred.

"Now, by the Rood!" he swore, "may their name be damned forevermore. The traitors!"

And that was a strange thing, too. For even as he spoke there seemed a haze be-

fore his eyes. *Blue haze of oddly fragrant smoke, and bodies hunched across a patterned board.* And from a million miles, a million years away, came thin remembered voices. A taunting voice, yet kind, saying, "*You see? Imaginative yet inconsistent. He prefaces his tirade against religion with a sacerdotal invocation.*"

But he did not stop fighting. Not when the enemy Crusaders had cut their way across the court, forcing the horsemen to dismount and seek the refuge of the palace. Not when he saw his cadet lieutenant fall, strangling in a lungful of his own blood as his querulous fingers doubted the arrow that had found his breast. Not when, one of a scantling score, he took final refuge in the West Wing, before the very chamber where His Majesty awaited rescue... or death.

Even then he did not stop fighting. He was a Knight and a soldier of the Queen. That the campaign had been mishandled he knew well... but it was not his to question these things. His but to fight, and keep on fighting, until death relieved him of his knightly vows.

And so it was that alone, he fell at last. Properly, it was to a peers blade he yielded. It was the Lord Captain of the Crusaders in person who slashed Sir Rufus' sword from his hands at the doorway to

the King's chamber. And there was a warrior's admiration in his offer.

"You are the last of your men, Sir Knight," he cried. "You have fought a good fight, but it is finished. Will you yield now, and spare me the slaying of a brave man?"

In answer, Sir Rufus hurled himself forward. The sword in his foeman's hand might yet be wrested from him... and the fight prolonged another minute... second...

But the captain saw his purpose and stepped back. Then, with a sign, he stepped forward again, blade raised. Sir Rufus took it straight, and took it striking.

The world grew dim, and figures moved like trees. Sir Rufus coughed, and there was blood upon his lips. The splintering of wood was the crumbling of the King's last bastion. The sweat of battle ended; there was a cold, clear wind upon his brow. A high hill yearning to a midnight sky, and a soft reluctant voice whispering from afar as the captain stepped over his fallen body.

"Well, now—I believe that's it..."

"Well, now—I believe that's it," said Weissmann in a soft reluctant voice. He settled back to his leather chair, expelled a cloud of blue and fragrant smoke. "Checkmate, Tom."

Ross nodded grudgingly.

"That's it," he acknowledged. "Confound you! I'm one move from mate myself... and you spend men like pennies to bottle me up in my own back yard!"

Weissmann smiled gently, shrugged, and turned his curiously gentle eyes on Springer, stirring in the chair beside the table. "Ah, there, lad... feel better?"

Rufus Springer passed a puzzled hand across his brow. He said uncertainly, "Game over? I must have slept."

There was a memory fleeting in his mind. Not recollection, truly, but the swift and scudding wisp of a fading dream. One he could not clutch for all his striving, elusive, growing dimmer with each instant. *Swords red with blood, and banners in the sun. Hoarse cries of pain, and the crash of a yielding door...*

"You were asleep," said Ross, "and missed seeing the sneakiest attack this cunning old rascal ever pulled on either of us!" He sighed and started rearranging the bits of carven ivory on the chessboard. "Ah, well, live and learn! Next time I'll watch my step when you start sacrificing men, Weissmann. If I'd trusted you less—"

"Or if you'd trusted your *Bishops* a little less, Tom," Springer said suddenly. "That's what destroyed you. The *Bishops* blocking out your *Rook*—"

He stopped abruptly, seized with the same wonder voiced by Ross.

"The *Bishops*? How in blazes do you know, Rufus? I thought you were asleep."

Rufus Springer said uncertainly, "I... I don't know *how* I knew, Tom. I—" He looked across the board at Weissmann. The older man was busy with his pipe, prodding its toothscored bit with a tarstained cleaner. His eyes met Springer's, and in them was no answer. But there was a glint, a hint of mockery... or was it the reflection of the light on Weissmann's glasses? "I don't know," repeated Springer vaguely. "I honestly don't know."

"Ah, well," said Weissmann, "does it really matter? Our game next, Springer. That is, if you're ready to match wits with the old master?"

"I'm ready," said Springer, and slipped into the chair vacated by the disconsolate Ross. "My White?"

"If you wish," nodded Weissmann. Then, as he disposed the pieces, "Now, then, as I was saying before the game... about this matter of free will—"

"Good Lord!" sighed Ross. "There he goes again! Now we'll hear more about screaming and thinking chessmen!"

Rufus Springer said nothing. There rang in his ears the sound of distant battle, the nickering of horses and

the screams of dying men. And suddenly he knew... *he knew!* And knowing, he was gripped with a terrible unease, a fear more strong than he had ever known.

Pawns like men... who fatuously dreamed that they were masters of their own fate, rulers of their own evitable destiny.

Then a chessman, he, on a

patterned board so vast as to be inconceivable to his earthly mind? Even that idea he could accept and tolerate. Save for one thing...

By Whose hand was he moved? The swift and cunning hand of a Master Chessman? The sure hand of a supramudane Weissman? Or the fumbling hand of an uncertain Ross?

For the benefit of those who would be interested in studying the game in which Rufus Springer participated as Queen's Knight, the following is offered:

WHITE (Weissmann)	RED (Ross)
1. P-K4	P-K4
2. N-KB3	N-QB3
3. B-B4	B-B4
4. P-QN4	BxP
5. P-B3	B-R4
6. P-Q4	PxP
7. 0-0	P-Q6
8. Q-N3	Q-B3
9. P-K5	Q-N3
10. R-K1	KN-K2
11. B-R3	P-N4
12. QxP	R-QN1
13. Q-R4	B-N3
14. QN-Q2	B-N2
15. N-K4	Q-B4
16. BxP	Q-R4
17. N-B6ch	PxN
18. PxP	R-N1
19. QR-Q1	QxN
20. RxNch	NxR
21. QxPch	KxQ
22. B-B5ch	K-K1
23. B-Q7ch	K-moves
24. BxN mate	

the
signals
to
mars

by...M. BOWER

Most people suspected he was a spaceman - even though his wife insisted he couldn't be!

THE SO-CALLED signals are going out to Mars again, and the papers are reviving that story about me. But the simple truth is that I'm no more a Spaceman than you are.

Of course it was all my wife's fault. One day a couple of years ago, I came home, dragging my feet from a long day at the punch machine. I stopped on the front porch to stamp the snow off my shoes, and Shirley came running to the door.

"Don't take your over-shoes off," she ordered. "Old Mr Brown died this morning. I just went in their house to see what I could do, and poor old Mrs. Brown is just freezing to death, because she doesn't understand how to work the furnace. Run round there and help out, huh?" She took my lunch pail off me and shut the door in my face.

Well, a guy has to help out at a time like that. Old Mr. and Mrs. Brown had been good neighbours. So I walked around the corner, knocked at Mrs. Brown's door, and offered my services. The old girl didn't seem to be too cut

M. Bower—we've not told what the initial stands for—is a young Canadian writer, a recent recruit to Science Fiction, who has sold to Chatelaine and Saturday Night. Here is the true story, or so she assures us, of those recently reported signals sent to Mars from Ontario, Canada!

up about her husband, and she came down the cellar with me to watch me stoke up. She seemed to understand when I showed her how to operate the drafts, and I told her I would look in before I went to work in the morning and put some coal on for her. Then I went home for my supper.

When I got in, there was a big surprise waiting for me. In the twenty minutes it had taken me to help the old lady, Shirley had given the older kids their supper, and the twins were nearly through theirs. For once my wife and I were able to sit down and eat together. Shirley had even grabbed time to put some lipstick on, and it was sure a welcome change to eat a meal in peace and quiet.

I stoked up the furnace for the old lady the next morning, and that night I ran in again. Soon it was the accepted thing that I should go straight to Mrs. Brown's and fix her furnace before going home from work. Her paper was always on the step, and after a while I got in the habit of stoking up the fire, then sitting on an upturned box for about twenty minutes, reading and waiting for the fire to burn up. It got so that the half hour was the most restful part of my day. At home, the TV was always on, and the bigger kids were squawking over the programmes and howling for the

funnies in the papers before I had even glanced at the sporting page. But here in Mrs. Brown's cellar it was quiet and peaceful. I sat and had a quiet smoke, read any part of the paper I wanted, and sometimes, gazing at the flickering coals, I even thought about what I had read.

Shirley seemed to like it, too. It gave her a chance to feed the kids without having to worry about me, too, and then we had our own quiet little interval together. I began to think that fixing the old lady's furnace was the best thing I had ever done.

When summer came and Mrs. Brown let her furnace out, that was O.K. too, for we led a different life in the summer. But when the days started closing in again, and the air got cool, I found myself thinking longingly of the quiet minutes in Brown's cellar, and actually looking forward to the day the furnaces were started.

Well, it came—a day with a nip in the air, that grew colder and colder, and I dropped my lunch-pail home, and went off to Mrs. Brown's feeling like a kid on his way to the barn with an arm load of comic books. I gave my usual rattat on the side door, which was unlocked, as usual, and bounded down the cellar stairs. I turned to the furnace, and stood, as coldly disappointed as a cookie-hungry kid who finds the jar empty.

There, in the middle of the cellar floor, stood an elaborate piece of modern art—a brand new oil burning furnace!

Mrs. Brown had followed me down the cellar, and either my disappointment showed in my face, or she was a very understanding lady, for she lifted her grey-brown head, looked at me with her soft old blue eyes, and said, "I hope you'll still come—I like to know that somebody comes in regularly. Besides, this acts as a sort of humidifier, too, and I need some help in putting water in the thing."

It was a queer contraption, but Mrs. Brown seemed to understand it. All she wanted me to do was fill a couple of pails of water and carry them to the humidifier. She could easily have filled the thing herself with the hose from her washing machine, but I didn't say so, because I still wanted those twenty peaceful minutes. When I got home, I didn't say a word to Shirley about the oil burner. It would be hard to explain why I preferred an old box in Mrs. Brown's dark old cellar to a nice soft easy chair in my own comfortable home. I guess I might have told her about it, only just around that time the three old ladies coming home late from a Bingo game saw the flying saucer.

It was the size of an English car, and it landed on the

roof of Brown's garage, then slowly sank right through the roof into the garage itself.

Well, you know the type of old ladies who go to Bingo games. They didn't go running for a cruiser, or phoning their sons. They went right over and tried the door of the garage. It was locked, so the old girls knocked up Mrs. Brown, got the key, and while Mrs. Brown phoned the police, they opened the garage door. There was nothing there, for Mrs. Brown sold the car when the old man died. But they all agreed that the garage door came open with a queer sucking sound, and the garage floor looked "shimmery". When the old ladies felt it, it was hot.

The police cruiser didn't find a thing, and no one else had seen anything, so after a lot of interviews in the local paper, the whole thing died down. As a matter of fact, the old girls were sort of ashamed of what they had seen, as though it wasn't quite respectable, and quit talking about it themselves. I'd have thought the whole thing was a lot of hooey, anyway, if it hadn't been that one of the old ladies was my mother-in-law.

I know that if she agreed with the other two about what they had seen, they must have seen *something*, for the other two had both won at Bingo and she hadn't, and she would have

been in a mood to contradict Sherlock Holmes.

We talked it over amongst ourselves, and decided that they must have seen a meteor, which looked as if it fell on Brown's garage. The 'Queer look' and the 'warm floor' we ignored, as we did the old ladies' claim that there had been a Spaceman standing up in the Space ship. Even the papers were ashamed to print that bit, except in a light, mocking tone.

For a couple of weeks the papers played around with the story, half sensational, half kidding. And then there was another crisis in the near-east, and they dropped it. That was when there was, suddenly, an odd change in our neighbourhood. In a couple of weeks we had a new post-man, a new bread-man, a new milk-man. Our street was swept every night, our drains were cleared every week, and all the old, defective sidewalks were repaired. Even the bump in the road was fixed, and hydro and telephone wires were repaired. Everything we had been hollering about for years was attended to for us, and even the roof of a decrepit old apartment house was repaired. All this activity invited the inspection of the usual sidewalk superintendents, and all in all our neighbourhood saw many strangers and much traffic during those few weeks.

Then, suddenly, it all end-

ed as quickly as it began. For a day all was peaceful, and then they arrested me.

They took me as I was going into Mrs. Brown's that night, and nobody would tell me the charge. I was bundled into a conservative looking, 1951 model car, with a particularly sweet running engine. Wherever I was taken, it wasn't the old jail or the courthouse. It seemed to be a sort of private office, and when they told me the charge against me, I knew why.

It seems I was sending signals to Mars!

Sure, I laughed and told them to knock it off. But after a couple of hours I discovered it wasn't a gag. Somebody was sending signals to Mars. One of the hush hush stations in the far north had caught on to it. The Planetarium in New York, the observatory at Mt. Palomar, and some other place nobody knows is an observatory, had all caught them. To say nothing of scientists in other countries. There was no doubt about it—they were signals, and they were messages. And they were coming from our neighbourhood. The F.B.I., the R.C.M.P. and Scotland Yard had all proved it, and something I heard made me think that almost every other country in the world had been giving information. This thing, in fact, was bigger than all of us. So big, we were, maybe, at last One World.

They arrested me, because, after a month of intense spying, checking and testing, they found that I was the only suspicious character in the whole district. They'd found out from Shirley, (via the new bread-man) that I disappeared down Brown's cellar to stoke the furnace every night, and they found out, (via the new gas-man) that Mrs. Brown's furnace did not require stoking.

So for hours and hours they asked, in a variety of manners, "What do you do in Brown's cellar?" and for hours and hours they received the answer that they already knew—"I fill two pails of water and read the paper." The new, sure-fire lie detector never quivered.

The papers got hold of it, of course. The first Shirley knew of my whereabouts was when she picked up the paper and read, "Is this man a Spaceman?" The general idea seemed to be, "Yes, he is," even though Shirley cried over and over that I was in bed and asleep when the old ladies saw the Space ship, or whatever it was.

In the end they let me go. Not because they thought me innocent, but because—well—there isn't anything on the law books about charging a man with being from another planet and sending signals back home. By then, the signals had stopped, anyway. They tore Mrs. Brown's cel-

lar and furnace apart, found nothing, and had to put everything back together again. They tore the garage apart, found a strange reaction coming from the floor, but couldn't place it, trace it, or do a thing about it.

Somebody wanted to try me under some ancient, witchcraft laws, but the signals had been over quite awhile then, and the star-gazers and crime-chasers were beginning to feel a little ridiculous. Finally, it seemed that most of them felt, in their own minds, that it had all been some freak of nature, and all they wanted to do was forget the uproar as soon as possible.

I started going back to Mrs. Brown's cellar again. I never said a word to her about what had happened, except just once, that first day. I filled the pails with water for her, and carried them over to the humidifier part of the furnace.

"Quite a little show we had, huh?" I asked, as I lifted the pails for her.

"Yes," she said, looking at me with those faded blue eyes. "Do you know that there was an expert from Russia looking at my furnace when they took it apart? Queer how fear of the unknown can make the greatest enemies unite and work together. Strange if an imagined threat from a distant star should bring peace on this earth!"

That's all she ever said about it, and all I said. Shirley has never tried to stop me from going back to Mrs. Brown's. I guess her minutes of peace mean a lot, too. So that's how things are. Or were, until this middle-east crisis came last week.

The signals are going up again. The papers are going

wild, and the whole thing is starting once more. But I sit in Mrs. Brown's cellar, enjoying my twenty minutes of peace and quiet. Nobody bothers me, and I don't bother anybody. What Mrs. Brown does when she goes inside that furnace is none of my business. And anyway, I'll read about it in the papers.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

I was beginning to wonder if anything had gone wrong.

I was in the right city and in the right year and—or so I'd thought—on the right day. I'd set the controls myself for the specific day and hour in May of 1857 when, according to DeSandras, Napoleon III had been attacked by an assassin while walking here in the garden. It'd suddenly become important to me that I see this man who'd come so close to killing the Emperor. I was doing my thesis on his early years, and on how the Carbonari had tried repeatedly to assassinate him. DeSandras, the only one to mention the attack, had glossed over the man's identity, and I'd been seized by the irrational obsession of the true researcher that I *must* see and perhaps identify him. We were under strict instructions, of course, not to tamper with history in these Timeliner researches. Our job was to observe and to analyze facts brought out by personal observation. And *not* interfere!

It was getting dark, and still no Emperor. It was starting to drizzle, and I caught myself wondering if you could catch a cold in one century—suddenly there were footsteps on the gravelled walk, nearer and nearer, and in front of me stood the familiar little bearded man, glittering eyes suspicious as he stared at my strange clothes and at the minitape at my feet. "Aha! What is this? A spy?", he growled, and rushed forward. They'd all been right—he'd had courage.

I could feel him tug at my coat—and then, in the same moment, there was the familiar blackness—the blazing light—and then the blackness again—and then the worried voice of Davis, the lab assistant. He was wondering how I felt. Then I realized he'd stopped, eyes wide with interest. "What's this? What did you do with your coat button?"

in
hoc
signum
vincit

by...K. W. BENNETT

I am no fool. I knew darn
well who he was even with-
out the hoof. It showed....

ABE LINCOLN remarked one bad day in 1861, "I hope I have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky." Abe won Kentucky for the Union. It is sometimes doubted by a few in business whether the Lord did as well. In Kentucky, that is. Personally, I have definite information that there is something drastically wrong in Kentucky. No, no, nurse, I'd just like to sit out here in the sun a moment longer and talk with these pleasant folk.

Yes, Kentucky. It was my downfall, virtually, and I ought to know, because I'm in the outdoor sign business and if ever there was a state that was He—, pardon me, difficult on outdoor sign men, it's Kentucky. After all, one of their important staple products isn't advertised without bringing down revenue men like flies round a whey barrel. But I was sales manager for what Albion Sign used to call its South Central Sales District, and I had no more signs sold than Montgomery Ward had retail outlets. You say they've changed their merchandising policy? It's been so long since I've read a newspaper....

When you are in the outdoor sign business, even dollar exchange difficulties can be hurdled. The important thing is that the salesman has sold a colossal spectacular, and business being business But when the Federal Reserve begins to be deluged with gold coins and bars then —

Well, to tell you the truth, I had two problems. One was Kentucky and the other was Clovis Kempt. Clovis was a brilliant chap. One of those people who can sell anything to anyone, anywhere. We'd naturally, because that is the way business is done, given him our best territory where selling was easiest. I refer, of course, to Pennsylvania and New York in the turnpike area. But he was jaded. That man just needed a hard sell. Kept complaining about his liver after a time. Then it was his eyesight. He believed it was failing. When he decided the fluorides some cities were beginning to filter into their water supply reservoirs was ossifying his backbone, I made the logical move and combined both problems by giving Kentucky Clovis and Clovis Kentucky.

The move was so obvious as to be regarded by top management with considerable suspicion and it was necessary to battle with the Board Chairman, the President, the Board of Directors, and then Clovis himself, who had meantime decided to give up selling outdoor spectaculars and peddle atomic reactors for North American Aviation.

And you still think General Sales Managers are so overpaid?

I bundled Clovis off to Kentucky and waited more in fear than in hope. It is no simple thing to be General

Sales Manager and Kentucky was a pebble in my boot that was bidding fair to cost me the race. Kermit Plevin, a beefy and on the whole repugnant individual was after my job (he'd been in the second best sales position and moved into the home office when he took over Clovis' old territory), and was spending more time in the President's office and at the Board Chairman's golf club than on the road and I knew damn well why, the double-crossing nose-picker. No, nurse, I am not exciting myself. I'll just finish my orange juice and this little story and be in immediately.

Well, Clovis was gone into Kentucky and silence for two weeks and a world waited. The atmosphere at the home office suggested a Cabinet meeting waiting the news from Gettysburg with myself in role of Union Chief of Staff. Kermit Plevin redoubled his efforts at countermining, and I happen to know that he hates golf and can't stand the President. We were both beginning to betray signs of wear when the first wire came from Clovis.

"Have sold spectacular. Specifications follow. Colossal. Dollar exchange difficulties. Can you except gold in payment question mark. Otherwise No Sale. Signed Clovis Kempt."

Gold is not legal tender, but I figured I'd take any-

thing including barter out of Kentucky at that moment and wired back, "Get all you can currency and settle for remainder in gold. Get in and sell. Signed Cranke." We received a bank draft in due order for the sign and a handsome sum it was. I pulled out the office gazetteer and could find no foreign states bordering Kentucky, and no mention of any foreign embassies in the state, and finally checked the specifications Clovis had forwarded by mail. "ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE", was the banner; surrounded by flashers, mixed neon in red and green, a border of neon flame, and in forty feet width. He was right. It was colossal. Pleven choked on his own gall, bless him. He was so sunburned at the moment he looked like a blister, and his backswing was getting worse, the Board Chairman confided to me. They had been playing doubles at \$1 a point and our Board Chairman is not the most beneficent of men. He might, as a matter of fact, be called downright stingy.

Clovis fired in his second wire. "Spectacular same deal as before on payment, but to include some bullion, gold bars, jewelry. Spectacular. Can I go ahead question mark. For same account. Signed Clovis." I wired back, "Get in and sell if you have

to take cows in payment. Signed Cranke." The specifications on that one read "OUR UNBOWED LEADER, HIS DARK THRONE." We made it up and it was some job. Rocket flares, scotch light, a smoke ring blowing device in dead center, and a waterfall of fire. Beautiful. And what a packet of money. Two sales and one account Clovis had boosted Kentucky into first place for the Spring quarter.

We'd just gotten that one into the shop and Clovis wired again. "Client keen but dollar exchange problem getting worse. Any ideas question mark." I wired back "The cows, take the cows, take anything short of scrap iron in trade but keep selling. We will advance heavy credit on receipt of client's credit standing. This last mere formality. Sell."

Clovis to Cranke. "Client insists no credit. How about long missing art treasures question mark. Signed Clovis." That one netted us two supposedly lost Rafaels and three small Corot watercolors and the sign was the biggest yet. The banner line read "BETTER TO REIGN IN HELL THAN SERVE IN HEAVEN." The Rafaels were authentic, and I knew trouble was going to start when the newspapers got hold of that one, but the whirlwind was on us before we were prepared. But, man,

I shall never forget the size of that second quarter sales report.

Some smart aleck reporter got word that the Federal Reserve was being deluged with gold coin and bars in the Kentucky area and connected it up with the Rafael we were marketing and the chowder really hit the fan. Internal Revenue, Customs inspectors, Treasury agents, the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The home office reception room looked like a wardheeler's the day after municipal elections, and every one of them was connected with the government somehow.

I flew out to confer with Clovis, met him at Frankfort, and he took me to confer with the client. Way up in the hills, in those limestone caves, it was, and it took 48 hours of driving over backroads to shake the federal agents and get to the client. I thought Clovis was kidding, but that lad never kids. He sells. What a salesman! There was our sign, "ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE," up over a large cavemouth all landscaped with some kind of evergreen trees. Strong resemblance to a rundown cemetery in which the perpetual care attendant had abandoned his post.

Clovis introduced me to the client, who was waiting at the cave mouth. I am no

fool. I knew darn well who he was even without the cloven hoof and I'd been pretty sure of it since the order for the second sign had come in. But I am imperturable and that is how I became General Sales Manager. "You finding business good?" I inquired. The client smiled and said it couldn't be better.

"Institutional advertising will do it. Works slow, but it's the solidest kind," I said, getting in a plug. I had momentary visions of Highway 12 dotted coast-to-coast with Albion signs advising the public to go—, well, to see the Underworld, more or less.

"Yes, but there's the dollar exchange problem. So little money is lost or destroyed in illicit circumstances these days. You Americans do everything on the installment plan. All Paper and no money," he said.

"Aren't you a citizen? I inquired, perhaps a trifle blankly. I voted Republican in 1948.

"No," he said. "We maintain branches everywhere, but establish no national citizenship. Part of our service contract, you know. But it does make things damnably difficult." He grinned when he added that.

"I see what you mean. And so no credit rating. Okay, we'll barter," I said.

I said goodby and turned to the car and he smiled the way a wolf used to when they

threw the baby off the back of the sled, and shot his horns out of his forehead and said, "I'll be seeing you."

You see what I mean. There is something drastically wrong in Kentucky. Well, the upshot of it is, I came back and told the Board Chairman and the President, and they decided we'd best push on, as long as Clovis could keep the account tied up. Perish the thought that he can't. The boy is a bulldog, a real snapper. I was subpoenaed, and that's when I and the President and Ken, that's our Board Chairman, decided I needed a rest and

I'm in here on full salary. And you know, Kentucky has been our biggest sales state for two years.

I'm out of it. And as long as we deal in jewels and silver, I guess we're in no trouble, though they are certainly hot after us on taxes. But that nasty remark about seeing me later. Kermit Pleven, Yes. But Me? I tell you, there is something wrong with their Kentucky branch. Coming, nurse. Must watch my health. Early to bed and early to rise for a long, restful life. Yes, Gentlemen, there is something indubitably wrong in Kentucky.

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fillmore y. brightforks

by HOWARD SCHOENFELD

Gentlemen, I need not tell you this is a fateful hour. Have none of you any suggestions, any ideas all? Well?

The Time: Armageddon
Throughout the world, the forces of the United Nations were in retreat on all fronts. In Europe, the enemy was in possession of Germany and Austria, large parts of France and Italy, and most of Spain. With the capture of Gibraltar, and the subsequent bottling up of the Mediterranean Sea, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Greece, cut off from their allies, surrendered without a struggle. The Arab countries fell shortly thereafter.

In Africa the story was the same. The enemy, marching southward, absorbed the natives into his army or destroyed them, toppling colonial governments along the way. In a matter of weeks, the invader's flag was flying over Johannesburg and the whole of Africa.

In South America, Uruguay alone found the strength to stand against the revolutionary forces unleashed by the rising world power. In the dictator countries, the disenfranchised peons and workers, led by enemy agents, rose in their full strength and destroyed their national governments. At the end of the first year of war a Latin-Ameri-

Howard Schoenfeld, former newspaper reporter and columnist, whose LET THEM EAT BULLETS has gone into several printings here and in Argentina, turns to SF with this story of a rather machiavellian youngster, product of tomorrow's Madison Avenue, who saves the West.

can army of millions had marched on Mexico City and was awaiting the signal to continue northward to the Texas border.

The mightiest military machine on the face of the earth was being assembled in the captive lands. The enemy's target was the last citadel of western power—the United States of America.

At U. N. headquarters in New York City, Supreme Commander Hugh Boulter bluntly addressed the remaining generals of the allied high command.

"Our hydrogen bombs are useless," the commander said. "The enemy's invasion forces are gathering at widely scattered points throughout the world. If we use atomic bombs we can destroy his armies, but his capacity to draw on his population reserves for replacements will be unimpaired. Our own forces, on the other hand, are highly concentrated in the lands remaining to us. The enemy's bombs will not only destroy our armies, but our industrial and population centers. We will be unable to raise and equip new armies.

"Our atomic artillery is equally useless. The enemy can match us shell for shell, and has the manpower to replace his losses; we haven't. As for secret weapons our intelligence reports show the enemy has a comparable or superior counter weapon for each. In addition, we're hope-

lessly outnumbered on the field of battle."

Commander Boulter paused. His expression was grim.

"The invasion of North America cannot be prevented," he said. "It can only be delayed."

The allied generals listened in stony silence.

"The enemy's ultimatum has been delivered: surrender or die. His terms are onerous beyond belief, but we cannot spill blood in a hopeless cause. Unless we can devise a strategy that has a possibility of success, we will have to consider them. Gentlemen, I need not tell you this is a fateful hour. Have any of you any new suggestions, any ideas at all?"

The commander faced each of his generals in turn. Each reluctantly shook his head, no.

"Then," said Commander Boulter bitterly, "we must sue for peace on the enemy's terms. We must yield without resistance, praying the enemy will be merciful—if, indeed, he will allow us to pray. We have no alternative but to give up our homes, our people, our land and our government to the occupation forces of the enemy."

"No!" cried a voice at Commander Boulter's elbow. "Never!"

The voice was that of Fillmore Y. Brightforks, the commander's trusted orderly, a blue-eyed, tow-headed lad of 12 who had been assigned by

his scout master to do the commander's bidding. The cry had been wrung from the very depths of Fillmore's being by the words he had heard.

All eyes were upon him.

"No," the young boy scout repeated. "Never."

"You have a plan then, Fillmore?" the commander asked.

"Yes sir, I have," Fillmore replied.

At these forthright words the generals leaned forward in their chairs eagerly.

"And why haven't you mentioned your plan before?" asked Supreme Commander Boulter.

"I couldn't bring myself to it, sir. It's too horrible, too fiendish, too diabolically machiavellian to wish on anyone," said Fillmore.

Commander Boulter smiled. "Then it ought to do just fine," he said.

"Yes, indeed," said the generals, nodding their heads in agreement.

The first phase of Fillmore's plan called for an army of workmen, skilled in the dismantling of industrial plants. Quickly, they were withdrawn from the ranks of the allied armies and shifted to key cities throughout the United States. There, they were set to work.

Overnight, the industrial skylines of New York, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburg, San Francisco and Los Angeles disappeared. As quickly as

the factories were dismantled they were crated, numbered and transported by land, sea and air to designated spots within eyesight of the battlefields of the world. There, they were rebuilt.

The astonished enemy saw the principal industry of the west within easy grasp of his victorious armies. It was a bait no industrially hungry power could resist. Moving rapidly, the enemy's armies captured the rebuilt plants, dismantled them, and shipped them to cities deep in their interior.

There were pleased smiles at allied headquarters. It was the beginning of the end for the naive foe.

The next phase of Fillmore's plan called for a picked force of civilians to be planted behind the enemy's lines. Agents of the allied command, sworn to strictest secrecy, contacted the wanted men and brought them in to the assembly hall at U. N. headquarters. Their number was a scant hundred.

"Each of you will be given enemy currency to the extent of your holdings here," Fillmore briefed them in the assembly hall. "You will then be transported by plane to places inside the enemy's territory where secret landings can still be made. From there we expect you to make your way on foot to the nearest city. Afterwards, all we ask is that you live with the enemy as citizens of his country, con-

ducting yourselves there as you have here."

A question came from the back of the hall.

"And when will we be contacted?"

It was an embarrassing question. Fillmore ignored it.

"You will be more valuable to us behind the enemy's lines than here. The odds are now ten to one that America will be invaded and conquered within a very short time. If so, we can expect nothing but bloodshed, terror and the wholesale confiscation of property. Under the circumstances we believe each of you will want to do as you've been asked."

Fillmore paused. It was his intention to subvert the enemy by exposing him to the worst elements of American life. Glancing around the hall, he felt he'd chosen his men well.

"Are there any objections?" he asked.

There being none, the assembled men were given their promised currency and led to waiting planes which quickly took off and sped them to their respective destinations.

In the days that followed there were some anxious moments at allied headquarters. They were dispelled forever when allied intelligence agents, working behind the enemy's lines, began sending in their reports. The hundred, armed with ample enemy currency, had quickly bribed

their way into key positions in the government and economy of their new country, and were conducting themselves as they'd been asked.

Among them were a handful of distinguished men who had long been ambitious to emulate the robber barons of old. In America, where they'd been a minority in the commercial world, their ambitions had been held in check by anti-trust laws and by the natural forces of competition.

No check at all existed in the enemy's monolithic state. Monopolies were government controlled and supported; competition was forbidden. Once entrenched in the system there was no limit to the damage they could do.

They began by raising the prices and lowering the quality of the necessities of life. As prices went up, wages went down and working hours were extended. The enemy man-in-the-street soon became the enemy man-in-the-gutter. Economic enslavement followed.

The profits of the new combines, however, were not for the enemy rulers, for Fillmore had thoughtfully sent along a few carefully picked tax collectors (shady fellows, recently released from federal prisons) along with some equally carefully picked politicians (unbelievably shady, held in contempt by their colleagues). Working hand in hand, they not only pocketed the bulk of the proceeds,

but also raided and bankrupted the enemy's treasury.

To disrupt the enemy's domestic affairs, Fillmore had sent over a former politician who was especially gifted at finding ghosts where none existed. In no time at all he'd convinced the enemy leaders that their entire nation was subversive, and had it so declared. Millions were executed before the former congressman, who had neglected to remove his own name from the list, was himself declared subversive and executed.

To confuse the enemy's newspaper readers, Fillmore had sent over a few tabloid editors who had organized a new daily paper consisting entirely of headlines. The first edition hit the streets with the following information in bold type:

**ALLIES ADVANCING ON
ALL FRONTS
ALLIES RETREATING ON
ALL FRONTS**

Both headlines were known to be sales getters. The new paper was an instantaneous sellout, spreading misinformation everywhere.

For the cultural front, Fillmore had selected two enterprising writers who quickly altered the enemy's Hate America propaganda theme to a theme of their own choosing: Hate Everybody. While one flooded the newsstands with paperback novels glorifying violence, the other captivated the enemy with stories depicting

women as domineering mothers, faithless wives and fickle sweethearts. The results were immediate and profound.

Warfare broke out between the sexes.

Normal cohabitation ceased.

The birth rate dropped to zero.

Husbands and wives decimated each other nightly, and a state of individual siege existed throughout the land. No home was safe and no home was a refuge either, for Fillmore had also sent the enemy a number of advertising executives who had discovered the largest captive audience in history. With compulsory television in every dwelling and working place, the air waves were soon filled twenty-four hours a day with insane advertising jingles. Millions of enemy citizens were driven insane hourly. Other millions gladly committed suicide.

Many of the executives died of sheer joy; the remainder held a conference.

"What we need," said the chairman, "is an inexpensive product suited to the happy situation we find ourselves in. We must remember that we are dedicated to public service. It ought to be something worthwhile."

"Air," said one of the brighter conferees, after a moment's reflection. "It's the least expensive thing on earth, and one of the most

worthwhile. Everybody needs it."

"True," said the chairman, "but would anybody buy it? After all, just plain air might be difficult to sell."

"Bottle it, and serve it hot," replied the bright conferee without hesitation.

"Excellent," said the chairman. "An excellent idea."

"Pap," exclaimed one of the other conferees.

"Perfect," said the chairman. "A perfect name for our new product. It's not only short and catchy, but also highly original."

"Hear! Hear!" said the remaining conferees.

Thus, Pap, a product of hot air, was born.

In a matter of hours an advertising campaign, complete with slogans and catchwords, was worked out in detail. The following morning lumbermen invaded the enemy's forest reserves and began chopping down trees. Half of the trees were used to make signs extolling the virtues of PAP; the remaining trees died with the signs nailed to their trunks. The results was land erosion on a wholesale scale. Dust storms arose, destroying crops and choking millions to death. None questioned the merits of PAP, however; it could be spelled upside down as well as backwards and forward:

P
P A P
P

Placards proclaiming the spellability of PAP were placed on road blocks on major highways, effectively cutting off traffic to the front where enemy troops were soon demoralized by the lack of supplies. Meanwhile, every town, city and hamlet was plastered with signs bearing other items of information about the new product:

People who shape public

Opinion use PAP

World leaders prefer PAP

Millions take PAP daily

The enemy citizen who had previously given undivided loyalty to the government now faced a high pressure campaign demanding undivided loyalty to the new hot air product. Street fighting broke out between factions supporting the old and factions supporting the new. Soldiers deserted the army to take sides. The slaughter reached civil war proportions.

The enemy was on the verge of collapse. Fillmore's agents had bankrupted his treasury, enslaved his working classes, lowered his living standards, corrupted his public servants, twisted his culture, suborned his press, subjected him to dust storms, ruined his forests, destroyed his food crops, raised his crime rate, eliminated his birth rate, increased his insanity rate, multiplied his suicide rate and pushed millions into the arms of execu-

tioners. Now they led him into civil war.

The coup de grace remained to be delivered.

It came when enemy workmen rebuilt the captured industrial plants which Fillmore had so cunningly made available for them. Towering over the skyline, the industrial plants which had once stood in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburg, San Francisco and Los Angeles began to pump soot and poisonous gas into the atmosphere. The deadly smog clouds that arose would have gone unnoticed in the industrial west where immunity had developed over the decades.

For the newly industrialized enemy, they spelled annihilation.

Workers asphyxiated at their machines, soldiers suffocated in their barracks, peasants perished in their fields. Children choked their lives out in their class rooms, house-wives fell in their homes, sleepers died in their beds.

Soldiers returning from distant battlefields found their country desolate, their homes empty, their government in a state of collapse.

The war was over.

A giant sigh of relief was heard around the world. In America, a spirit of hope ran like wildfire through a nation

which had tasted fresh air for the first time in decades. With the worst elements of its political and economic life eliminated, America went forward unhindered in its historic pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

Industry was rebuilt along new lines, with laws passed to prevent pollution of the atmosphere. With crooked politicians out of the way, the laws were enforced. Newspapers, freed of their dishonest elements, published the truth. In public life, ancient wrongs were righted.

Planes that had dropped bombs on enemy cities now landed in backward areas of the world to discharge cargoes of refrigerators and sewing machines.

Consumer goods were created in abundance. Housing was erected on an unheard of scale. With poverty and the slums wiped out, crime all but disappeared. Capital punishment was abolished except in the cases of the inventors of the juke box and the portable radio who were tortured to death in Madison Square Garden while millions cheered. Afterwards, Fillmore was unanimously elected president of the United States and was awarded a special merit badge by Commander Boulter himself.

The Golden Age of America had arrived.

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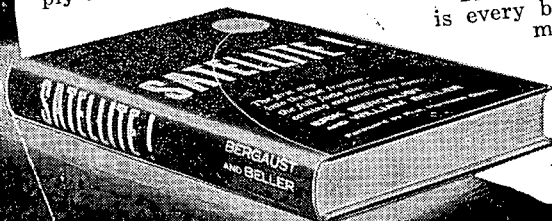
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